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Body, Subject, Self: The Art of Piero Manzoni

A dissertation presented

by

John Thomas McGrath

to

The Department of History of Art and Architecture

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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in the subject of

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Body, Subject, Self: The Art of Piero Manzoni

Abstract

Piero Manzoni (1933-1963) is one of the best-known and under-theorized artists in all of postwar Europe. His body of work includes a range of practices from monochrome painting to readymade objects, from participatory sculpture to designs for architecture. More than simply innovative in its form and media, however, Manzoni's practice articulates a politics of the body and of the self that departs radically from the belief systems at stake in the work of his contemporaries in both Europe and America. If other postwar artists still claimed access to transcendence, to nature, or to autonomous subjectivity, Manzoni responds with works that reveal the body and the self as material and discursive effects of power relations.

Each chapter of the dissertation examines an individual work or linked group of works in Manzoni's oeuvre. Chapter One draws on the theoretical approaches of Michel Foucault and Guy Debord to analyze an array of Manzoni works involving eggs and fingerprints. In Chapter Two, a group of participatory works centered around the *Magic Base* (1961) recruit spectatorial bodies and even the earth itself as readymades, thereby leveraging previously-liberatory avant-garde techniques in a radical reification of the body and the self. Chapter Three looks to the dialectic of organicity and syntheticity in Manzoni's use of materials, especially plastic, to argue that under the linked impacts of synthetic materials and industrial design culture, aesthetic practice can no longer claim

access to “nature.” Chapter Four offers a reading of Manzoni’s blank book *Piero Manzoni: Life and Works*, made of transparent plastic, in the context of literary and aesthetic negation from Mallarmé through Duchamp to neo-avant-garde of the later 1960’s. There then follows a coda, a short meditation in ten notes on Manzoni’s achrome series *Pacchi* (*Packages*) of 1962. Drawing on many themes presented in these chapters, the Conclusion positions Manzoni historically and theoretically as a European counterpart to Andy Warhol.

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Introduction

The period of artistic output for the Italian artist Piero Manzoni lasted only a few years, from late 1956 to early 1963.¹ His premature death at the age of 29 cut tragically short a body of work that is only now slowly emerging in its historical complexity. Although his name is well-known, American art historians and cultural institutions have only recently begun to recognize not only Manzoni's pivotal importance for the development of postwar art in Europe, but also his theoretical centrality for the elaboration of avant-garde practice in general during the period traditionally identified as postmodernism.

This dissertation explores three related fields—the body, the subject, and the self—as they are plotted in the work of this artist. These terms have been invoked often enough in existing accounts of this artist's work, but it is the task of this dissertation to specify the many dimensions of each—and their relationship to one another—through close readings of selected works in his oeuvre. Combining new analyses of under-studied works with fresh readings of his best-known pieces, I will argue that even as Manzoni employed the most advanced techniques of avant-garde criticality—including but not limited to the monochrome, the readymade, immersive architecture, audience participation, new materials and performance—what his works demonstrate are the ways in which artistic practice, far from offering emancipation, can actually partake in the reifying determination of the subject and the self, particularly through the mediation of the body. Throughout his many and varied works, Manzoni articulates a sustained

¹ This periodization excludes attempts at more academic painting that Manzoni undertook earlier in the 1950's.

critique of the humanistic sensibilities, liberatory hopes, and utopian claims that had so often served as the justifying rhetoric of avant-garde practice both before and after WWII. With an abiding pessimism often masked in uproarious comedy, Manzoni's work engages the artwork and the human beings around it at the most material and materialist levels imaginable, rejecting all idealist mythologies through aesthetic form that nonetheless calls those myths to memory as outmoded illusions.

Manzoni's insight was made possible by his specific positionality within the development of art, economics, and culture at the turn of the sixties, all of which were undergoing tremendous change, especially in Italy. The son of an aristocratic Milanese family, Piero Manzoni had been only twelve at the end of WWII. Family pictures document sunny summers in the seaside resort town of Albisola, also a small mecca for artists around mid-century, where young Piero encountered the maestro Lucio Fontana at an early age. Known for traditional ceramics, Albisola would also play host to Asger Jorn, Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, and the artists of the Italian informal variant *Arte Nucleare*, so the budding artist enjoyed enhanced exposure to the neo-avantgarde as he grew up. His diary from the mid-50's, recently edited by Gaspare Luigi Marcone, records the rapid development of a gregarious young intellectual, close to his friends and family and yet eager to define himself apart from tradition of all kinds—religious, philosophical, and aesthetic.² After attending the best primary and secondary schools in Milan, Manzoni made two false starts at university (first for law, then for philosophy) before devoting himself to art full-time.

His career coincides almost precisely with the most intense period of the Italian *miracolo economico*. This fact is stunning not only because of its historical

² Piero Manzoni, *Diario*, ed. Gaspare Luigi Marcone (Milano: Electa, 2013).

synchronicity, but also because of the astonishing brevity of these two phenomena: like Manzoni's career, Italy's transition to a modern industrial/consumer society took place extremely rapidly, in a period historians identify roughly between 1958 and 1963.³ As he witnessed the cultural landscape of Italy transformed in the image of imperialist American culture—the consumerism and market ideologies that rapidly took hold—he was surrounded by a European neo-avantgarde whose outlandish claims to freedom and nature seemed increasingly untenable.⁴ At the same time, a host of Milanese artists from Fontana to Bruno Munari were becoming enthusiastic participants in the exploding field of industrial design. Between the commercially affirmative milieu of Movimento Arte Concreta (MAC) and the neoromantic atmosphere of Nuclear Art, Spatialism, Nouveau Réalisme and Zero—the latter of which he was often if peripherally associated—Manzoni articulated a scathing rejection of the entire cultural apparatus of his time. Neither the neo-avantgarde nor traditional classicism escape his critique, nor does rapidly-expanding consumer culture and the industrialized spectacle that remains its visual regime.

It should be said from the start that key references for Manzoni were not only his European contemporaries, but also the leading artists of the American scene, as well as

³ Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 210-253.

⁴ In his indispensable study of postwar Italy, Ginsborg describes how the market-driven trajectory of the Miracle exacerbated existing social and economic imbalances even as it drew many Italians out of poverty. As is commonplace in market-based ideologies, the Miracle addressed the individual at the expense of the collective. Ginsborg writes, “the pattern which the boom assumed (or was allowed to assume) emphasized individual and familial roads to prosperity while ignoring collective and public responses to individual needs.” He links this atomization and imbalance to the specifically American character of the changes underway: “Thus the ‘economic miracle,’ by linking rising living standards with accentuated individualism, seemed to fulfill the American dream. It had introduced a new model of social integration to Italy.” Ibid., p. 216, 248.

the legacies of the historical avant-gardes. The artist was well aware, for instance, of Marcel Duchamp, Jackson Pollock, and Jasper Johns, all practicing in New York in the fifties, and this dissertation will explore Manzoni's dialogue with each in some detail. On the impact of the prewar avant-gardes, Manzoni was clear, writing, "*je ne voudrais pas tomber dans les histoires post-surréaliste, ou bien constructivistes.*"⁵ Both the utopian fantasies of the surrealists and the Enlightenment program of the constructivists will surface from time to time in this dissertation, particularly as they were refracted through the revisions of their postwar adherents. For Manzoni, these discursive memories usually arise only as darkly funny declarations of their bankruptcy under cultural and historical conditions circa 1960.

Emblematic of those times, the production of this artist spans a wide range of mediums and practices. After his stint with *informel* painting, from 1957 until his death Manzoni produced an enormous number of white monochrome paintings, all of which bear the title *Achrome*. He produced achromatic sculptures in a diverse range of materials, from kaolin-dipped fishing implements to constructions in straw and rabbit fur. He executed works on paper using only his fingerprints. He made a variety of small objects in the forms of the readymade and the consumer commodity, from small cans of preserves to do-it-yourself kits with rubber balloons. He made works composed of only a single line streaking along a scroll of paper, enclosed permanently in archival tubes. Around 1960, his work began to expand from the art object into performance and spectacle. He modeled designs for a pneumatic theater and other immersive environments. He staged performances around his objects, often in front of rolling

⁵ Manzoni in an unpublished letter to Jes Petersen (Archivio Piero Manzoni, Milan).

cameras, and he made objects that function only with the direct participation of the viewer.

Such diversity of practice was a common theme among practitioners in a number of cultural centers worldwide between 1957 and 1963, a period that was foundational for what Julia Robinson calls the “expanded arts.”⁶ In Paris, the Nouveau Réalistes like Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, and Nikki de Saint Phalle made the execution of painting into public performances. In New York, a generation of artists in the wake of John Cage had begun to reject medium-specificity in favor of score-based, performative, and otherwise temporal practices. Allan Kaprow’s Happenings departed from Pollock’s painted image to mobilize the spread of inscription in three-dimensional events that Richard Kostelanetz called “the theatre of mixed-means.”⁷ Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, for whom embodied participation was always implicit even in static works, began to collaborate directly with dancers and other movement-based artists like Merce Cunningham, Carolee Schneemann, and Yvonne Rainer. Artists associated with Fluxus were also on the move, making objects and boxes and kits in dialogue with a diverse range of live performances. In contact with all of these centers were the leading practitioners in Tokyo, whose bold departures from medium-specificity were documented annually at the Yomiuri

⁶ Julia Robinson, “Prime Media,” in *± 1961: Founding the Expanded Arts*, ed. Julia Robinson and Christian Xatrec (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2013). Although the expansion of the arts around 1960 may have scandalized a certain type of (American) critic beholden to the formalist historicism of Clement Greenberg, it is also important to remember that performance and immersive environments had long been integral aspects of the historical avant-garde, from Futurist *Serate* through Paris Dada demonstrations to the oneiric exhibition design of the Surrealists well into the postwar period.

⁷ Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means: An Introduction to happenings, kinetic environments, and other mixed-means performances* (New York: Dial Press, 1968).

Independent Exhibition, which from 1959 to 1962 distinguished itself in a Dadaist spirit as “Anti-Art.”⁸

To corral the variegated array of Manzoni’s practices into sensible categories, it might initially look tempting to split the work between the Achromes, which respond to the legacy of modernist painting, and the Duchampian works, which respond to the legacy of those avant-garde practices that had defined themselves in opposition to high modernism. Indeed, Manzoni’s practice is at first glance highly polarized between these extremes. The polarity is reminiscent of Thierry de Duve’s axiomatic distinction between the two possible responses to the crisis in painting at the beginning of the twentieth century: Picasso’s renovation of the practice through radical renewal, and Duchamp’s wry and melancholic abandonment of it.⁹

What is so significant about Manzoni’s practice, however, is that it inhabits both paradigms simultaneously. Or, better, it cuts across both, since versions of the monochrome and forms of the readymade will collide with one another early on in his practice. The category Achrome, for example, which at first designates pure white canvases dipped in kaolin (Fig. 1), becomes radically unstable. Eventually it will come to include not only small objects and larger sculptures, but also panels in gold fabric or glowing green phosphorescents, even some whose colors change from blue to pink. The Achromes also begin to incorporate the readymade in the form of bread rolls, eggs, and shoes, which invade the medium-dependent logic of modernist abstraction with the allusive operations of avant-gardism. Some Achromes are composed entirely of a

⁸ Doryun Chong et al, *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art In Japan 1945-1989, Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), p. 116.

⁹ Thierry de Duve, “The Readymade and the Tube of Paint,” *Artforum International* 24 (May 1986), pp.110-21.

readymade, as in one roll of toilet paper (Fig. 2), bound at the level of iconography and technical execution to works like the *Lines* (1959) and Manzoni's most infamous work, *Artist's Shit* (1961). Other works that at first glance do not appear to communicate with the legacy of modernism suddenly reveal themselves as participants in the modernist tradition of radical reduction and visual absence, like his achromatic book that is the subject of Chapter 4.

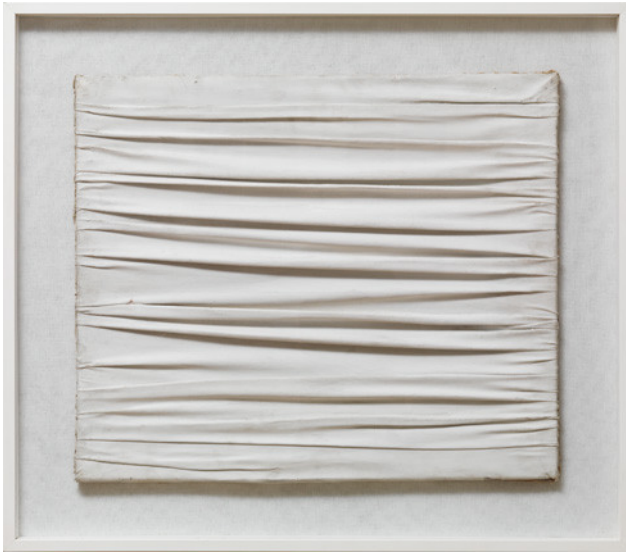


Figure 1. Piero Manzoni. Achrome. 1957

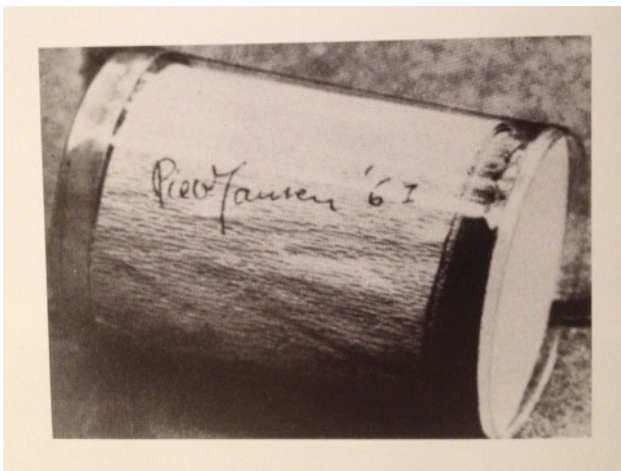


Figure 2. Piero Manzoni. Achrome. 1961

Spectacle and Its Negations

A far more productive (and less formalist) structure can be detected in the dialectical tension between aesthetic withdrawal and spectacular engagement in



Figure 3. Piero Manzoni. *Line*. 1959

Manzoni's works. Far from distinct fields, these forces move with and against one another in a dynamic of visibility and its negation under the conditions of an increasingly spectacularized cultural sphere. At one end of the spectrum, many of Manzoni's works function by withholding the visibility of their contents. They ferret away the inscriptions or substances from which they claim to be made, deferring spectatorial access onto a

series of discursive adjuncts. The *Lines* are only the most obvious example.¹⁰ Beginning in 1959, Manzoni would draw a long, continuous line on a long, continuous scroll of paper, which he would then seal into a container (Fig. 3).¹¹

These containers were initially tubes of black cardboard, but later, as the lines grew in

¹⁰ Benjamin Buchloh elaborated the terms of this visual dialectic in Manzoni's work, and my rubric here is indebted to his. Describing Manzoni's longer Lines, especially the Line 1000 Meters Long (1961), Buchloh writes, "The singularization of one constituent feature of the work, in this instance the drawing process as spatio-temporal extension, is magnified to such a degree that it gains...almost monumental public openness and accessibility." And yet, he continues, "As an object, it exists only insofar as it functions to negate the work's appearance—as a *containing concealment*." Benjamin Buchloh, "Formalism and Historicity," reprinted in ed. Julia Robinson, *New Realisms 1957-1962: Object Strategies Between Readymade and Spectacle* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); originally published in Anne Rorimer, ed., *Europe in the Seventies: Aspects of Recent Art* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1977).

¹¹ The structure of linear inscription on a scroll was derived from at least two major sources: John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg's *Automobile Tire Print* (1953), and Giuseppe Pinot-Galizzio's *Industrial Painting Rolls* (1958).

length and the scrolls in volume, they became gleaming metal canisters or soldered lead drums. On the outside of each container, a label would promise its unseen contents: the length of the line, the date of execution, and the signature of the artist. Often these labels would include a visual sample of the line inside, in the manner of a decorator's swatch or a scientific specimen, to stand in for the actual contents of the tube. Manzoni was emphatic that the Lines' containers must remain forever closed. Writing in all caps, the artist insisted, "THEY ARE ABSOLUTELY NOT TO BE OPENED!"¹²

Artist's Shit provides another example of visual obfuscation, both because the cans employ an aesthetic of enclosure and because we still do not know what they contain (Fig. 4). Their labeling is provocative: "Artist's Shit, contents: 30 grams net, freshly preserved, produced and tinned, in May 1961." Just in case, the label repeats its claim three times more, in French, German, and Italian. Manzoni posed with the tins next to a toilet in Denmark, beaming impishly—both at his own transgressive joke, and at the secret that each tin contains. Even after French performance artist Bernard Bazile opened one of the tins in 1989, studies of its contents remain inconclusive. To peek inside the open lid of Bazile's open work is to see only a tiny enigma: a spool-sized cylinder of fabric or paper, indeed with one excremental streak down its middle, rests in a nest of cotton. Other cans undoubtedly contain different contents, since often they rattle

¹² Manzoni to Jes Petersen: "Importante: LE SCATTOLE DELLE LINEA SONO SIGILLATE: NON BISOGNA APRIRE, MA ESPORLE E VENDERLE COSÌ, IN SCATOLA CHIUSA!! NON APRIRE ASSOLUTAMENTE!" [sic]. Unpublished correspondence, Manzoni Archive, Milan.

a bit when shaken, as though something heavy and wet had dried out inside. Some have even leaked a bit, extruding their contents onto their paper labels in fetid drips.¹³



Figure 4. Piero Manzoni. Merda d'artista (Artist's Shit). 1961

Aesthetic withdrawal as critical negation had been part of both the modernist tradition of reductivist painting *and* certain strains within the avant-garde. From at least Manet onward, for example, modernist painting had set as one of its central projects the systematic denial of spectatorial expectations, the piece-by-piece dismantling of the visual pleasures that painting had once provided: three-dimensional illusionism, demonstration of manual finesse, narrative and compositional drama, access to transhistorical myth, or a window onto a world into which the viewer could project herself. In the face of an industrializing culture of mass entertainment and the inexorable rationalization and technologization of the production process, painting withdrew its visual delights, negating the plenitude of aesthetic experience. Eventually this process of

¹³ The most likely hypothesis is that the vast majority of the cans are simply meat preserves with their labels changed. Author's conversation with the artist's sister Elena Manzoni di Chiosca.

reduction would lead to several points-zero, variously defined, some of which would be called the monochrome.



Figure 5. Marcel Duchamp. *With Hidden Noise*. 1916

Likewise Duchamp, who professed to reject painting entirely, also employed tactics of visual inaccessibility. In 1916, for instance, he made a piece with a secret inside (Fig. 5). For *With Hidden Noise*, Duchamp screwed two metal plates to either side of a hollow ball of twine; he then asked his friend

Walter Arensberg to place within this

rectified readymade an object of his choosing. Shake the thing, and it makes a noise, but nobody—not even Duchamp—could see what was in there.

Other works in Duchamp's oeuvre set precedents for the seemingly-endless parade of containers and containment in Manzoni's work, which include the plywood boxes that hold his *Uova* (1960), the balloons that contain his *Artist's Breath* (1960), or the *Pacchi* (1962) that contain who-knows-what. The oblong box that holds the *Corpo d'aria* (*Bodies of Air*) of 1960 recalls in several ways (physical dimensions, functional purpose, and gaming associations) the croquet box that holds Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913). Duchamp called his work "canned chance," since the three templates inside recorded the shapes that a length of string happened to take when Duchamp dropped it to the ground from the height of one meter. In this context, *canning* means to

contain and preserve a thing: be it an index of gravitational force, an extended line, human excrement, or something unknown. *Canning* contains its substrate within a certain physical enclosure to preserve it for posterity, to arrest its decay, to defend against death and to inscribe it in an archive, that “mnemotechnical supplement.”¹⁴ But in its temporal arrest—one might call it a *stoppage*—canning fundamentally alters its contents. What is “canned chance,” for instance, but a defense against contingency? What is it but the banishment of chance altogether? Aleatory principles are constrained within a template, prepackaged as if for transport and sale, converting the ludic play of chance into the endless repetition of commodified sameness.

Canning and commodities go hand-in-hand in Manzoni’s era, not only for his *Merda* but iconographically for Johns’ *Ale Cans* (1960) and Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup* (1962) or *Tunafish Disaster* (1963) as well: all of these cite the preservation of organic materials for mass distribution and consumption. Sometimes these materials perish anyway, their cans having failed to maintain a hermetic seal. The shit leaks. The eggs rot. The tuna turns (disastrously). Faulty seals or not, for Manzoni the commodity-form is an inevitable condition that haunts each and every one of his works.

The eruption of contents outward points to the second moment in Manzoni’s dialectic of visibility: from aesthetic withdrawal to spectacularized engagement. Developed by Guy Debord in the late sixties as a critique of visibility within the culture of advanced consumer capitalism, the *spectacle* describes the seductive and deterministic intervention of mass-produced imagery in the activity of everyday life. “The spectacle is not a collection of images,” writes Guy Debord, “rather, it is a social relationship

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” Eric Prenowitz, trans., in *Diacritics* Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), p. 14.

between people that is mediated by images.”¹⁵ Manzoni’s works continually solicit this social relation by inscribing the production and consumption of art within the apparatus of industrial image culture. Eggs stamped with a thumbprint or spheres inflated with breath—both achromatic enclosures that might initially be said to *resist* spectacle—get exposed, their critical aspirations exhausted, not least in newsreel performances.

Manzoni made four somewhat tawdry films for Filmgiornale SEDI, some of which have only recently been rediscovered. Confirming his project of erasing the criticality of aesthetic negation, the first of these films features the *Lines*. In it, the camera follows Manzoni’s friend Uliano Lucas as he buys a line on display in a gallery. As we watch, Lucas takes it home to his bedroom where he violates the unbreakable seal and opens the tube, uncovering the once-hidden line to the mechanical eye of the camera. As if to smirk at the inescapability of spectacularization, Manzoni allows the ruination of his work only within the context of a mass-distributed film. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Manzoni’s architectural designs should be for a para-cinematic theater, a giant blow-up monument to flashing lights and isolated spectators (see Chapter One, Section II).

This visual dialectic raises some pointed historical questions. What possibilities are left for critical negation and aesthetic withdrawal under the impact of culture industry and spectacle culture? Where do spectacle and negation intersect? Can they ever be distinct, or are they inevitably entwined? How can an artist engage the regime of spectacle without falling prey to its devices? Is such critical resistance even possible anymore? Finally, most crucial for Manzoni, what is the role of the body in all of this?

¹⁵ Guy Debord, “The Society of the Spectacle,” Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 12.

The Body in the Work

For generations of artists, the body had offered refuge, eroticism, mystery, action and even freedom. In response, Manzoni shat in a can. Explaining his disdain for the myth of the artist's body, he wrote, "If the collectors want something intimate, something truly personal from the artist, here is the artist's shit, something truly his."¹⁶ Rarely has aesthetic demystification been articulated with such caustic definitude.

Manzoni's understanding of the proper role for the body is clear enough in his final text. Near the end of his short life, the artist released the document "Some Accomplishments, Some Experiments, Some Projects," in which he chronicled highlights of his oeuvre.¹⁷ The writing has an ascetic yet distinctly valedictory tone, as if, in failing health (Enrico Baj remembers him drinking even more heavily than usual during this time), the artist is attempting to sum up a career as brilliant as it was truncated.¹⁸ What is striking about this chronicle is that nearly all of the works listed register some attempt to master the body explicitly in its biological registers, whether through recruitment of actual organisms and their products, mechanical mimesis of biological systems, or administration of sensory stimuli to elicit reactions. Though each of the projects he mentions can claim its own logic and valences, taken together they suggest a more

¹⁶ Germano Celant, ed. *Manzoni* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2009), p. 247 (hereafter "Celant 2009").

¹⁷ Piero Manzoni, "Some Realizations, Some Experiments, Some Projects," in Germano Celant, ed. *Piero Manzoni* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1998), pp. 220-223 (hereafter "Celant 1998").

¹⁸ Enrico Baj, "Scatological White," in *Piero Manzoni* (New York: Hirschl & Adler, 1990), p. 5.

general paradigm of the productive body: the body whose physical contingencies constitute mechanisms in the apparatus of production. In fact, a romp through the artist's oeuvre offers an array of attempts to master bodily systems through recruitment of actual organisms and their products. Often constructed in the language of commodity and spectacle, subjectivity remains anchored in a corporeal shell through bodily function, sensory apparatus, and positionality in institutional and discursive space.

A major category of Manzoni's practice governs works that offer parodic access to the body of the artist by marketing the biological products of that body. In 1960, for instance, Manzoni created his first *Corpo d'aria* (*Bodies of Air*) (Fig. 6), small kits containing a stand, a tube, and a balloon, which the artist offered to blow up himself for a higher price at a rate of 200 lire per liter.¹⁹ Later that same year, he marketed *Fiato d'artista* (*Artist's Breath*), balloons he inflated himself and tied to a base, complete with authenticating plaque. The *Breath* works radicalized the *Bodies of Air* not only through their ironic take on authorship, but also through their ephemerality, since the balloons would obviously deflate within days to cover the base in a formless rubber puddle. The exhaled breath, the titular material of the work itself, vanishes, leaving behind the ruined remnants of its container.²⁰ The artist also proposed to sell vials of his own blood,

¹⁹ Piero Manzoni. *Manzoni*. Celant, Germano, ed. (Naples: Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina, 2007), p. 192 (hereafter "Celant 2007"). The commodification of artistic labor has been an often-ignored hallmark of modernism from its earliest days. Take the Manet asparagus anecdote, for example: when a patron overpaid for the still life *Bunch of Asparagus* (1880), Manet sent a letter of thanks along with a small package to rectify the overpayment; unwrapping the package, the patron discovered a much smaller canvas, on which was painted a single stalk of asparagus. Likewise Seurat famously expressed his desire to be paid by the hour. In both cases, these foundational titans of modernist painting recognize that their own labor, even as it is mythically venerated, still falls under the general conditions of alienation and capitalist exploitation. Cf. Carol M. Armstrong, *Manet/Manette* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 280, and Yves-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 236.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 226-227.

although that project was never realized.²¹ Once again, the most infamous series of works in this category is undoubtedly *Artist's Shit*, which Manzoni insisted be sold for the price of their equal weight in gold according to gold markets for that day.²² Together these works construct an image of the human body as a productive machine, enveloped in and determined by systems of exchange value. The cultural capital that accrues in the valorized body of the artist becomes the object of mockery as Manzoni sells his own refuse—both respiratory and digestive—as luxury commodities for international markets.

²¹ Freddy Battino and Luca Palazzoli, *Piero Manzoni: Catalogue Raisonné* (Milano: Edizioni di Vanni Scheiwiller, 1991), p. 137 (hereafter “Battino and Palazzoli”).

²² Regardless of what the cans actually contain, the basic notion is that it contains excrement, and thus traded for the price of its equal weight in gold, the piece enacts a central thesis in the first chapter of Marx's *Capital*, in which a world of commodities can be made exchangeable not only for each other, but also especially for the money commodity, gold. That the exchange value of *Merda d'artista* fluctuates according to global gold markets (at least in theory) accomplishes several things. First, the piece gains a participatory dimension; more than a physical object, the work involves a certain protocol or process (of exchange). Second, the work consequently becomes temporally and even historically specific; since gold markets fluctuate over time, proper completion of the work will suture it into the specificities of capitalist relations at the very moment of its exchange. Third, since the conditions of that exchange will alter according to the market rates for a precious metal rather than for postwar Italian sculpture, the piece defies the dictates of the art market even as it insists on its own status as commodity. Commodification is a totalized process (particularly by 1960), so rather than offer the fiction of escape, Manzoni artfully substitutes one system of exchange value for another. It is an exchange exchange. Cf. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Frederick Engels, ed., Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, trans. (New York: Appleton and Co., 1889).

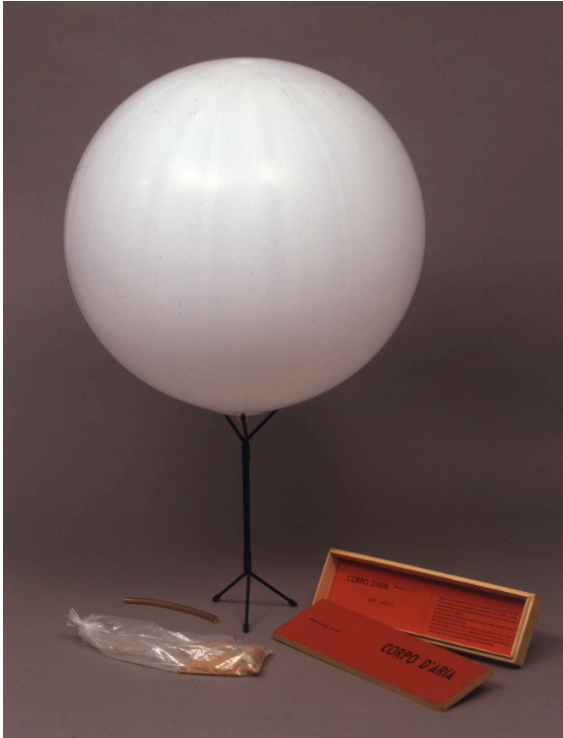


Figure 6. Piero Manzoni. *Corpo d'aria* (Body of Air). 1960

I have concentrated on the *Lines*, the *Breath*, and the *Shit* in this introduction for several reasons. First, they illustrate central themes and operations in Manzoni's body of work that will arise with regularity throughout this dissertation. They perform the dialectical tension between spectacle and negation that Manzoni's work achieve so brilliantly. Second, the latter two recruit the body as a fully instrumentalized, readymade apparatus, a crucial point for Manzoni in general. After the kaolin Achromes, however, these three works have already received more and better scholarly attention than any others of in Manzoni's oeuvre. Consequently—central as they are—they do not get their own chapters in this dissertation, but will recur from regularly throughout.

The Synoptic View

Dissertations can make for cumbersome reading. Therefore, at risk of rhetorical schematicity, allow me to ease the journey slightly with a map of the terrain ahead.

Divided into three sections, Chapter One makes an argument for the biopolitical body in Manzoni through his works that involve fingerprints and eggs. The first section of Chapter One analyzes the role of the fingerprint in Manzoni's work, which I argue is most productively read within the framework of Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics. If biopolitics has become a somewhat overdetermined buzzword in critical theory of the last decade or so, my use of the term here is pointed and specific. Instead of discussing the diffuse and increasingly totalizing operations of biopolitics in contemporary life, this chapter views the phenomenon through some of the concrete historical practices by which positivist sciences have made individual bodies simultaneously into unique anatomies and statistical ciphers—that is, biopolitical bodies. These originary modes of biopolitics focus on anatomy and identity in what Foucault called the “anatomo-politics” of the body. Zeroing in on the distinct semiotic structure of the biopolitical body in Manzoni, I trace the origins of fingerprint technology to the police sciences in development during the latter half of the 19th century. Fingerprinting—also called *dactyloscopy*—can only be discussed in the context of two other forms of body-knowledge with which it is historically entwined, namely anthropometry (the standardized measurement of the body) and mug-shots (the standardized photography of the physiognomy). These three techniques combined to form the standard corporeal profile of the police dossier.

From a semiotic point of view, all of these technologies of body-knowledge are indexical, and the chapter continues in this vein by situating Manzoni's practice within an artistic history of the corporeal index. Giving an account of aesthetic practice in the years leading to Manzoni's all-too-brief career, I propose a semio-historical model of corporeal indexicality from 1946 to 1964. Like all historical models, this rubric is bound to be narrow and partial, but it is articulated with the goal of situating Manzoni's practice with the greatest possible specificity.

The model unfolds in three overlapping stages. In advanced artistic practice of the immediate postwar period, there emerges a sudden and increasing proliferation of the corporeal index. In the first decade after WWII, both Jackson Pollock and Marcel Duchamp, strange bedfellows under any circumstances, seem to occupy themselves with little else, albeit in markedly different fashion. Pollock's coagulated skeins traced the bravura of painterly heroics, as Duchamp's part-objects punned a bodily erotics. For both, however, traces of the body retained a libidinal charge. Between the poles of these figures can be located the practice of the so-called neo-dadas, the gay generation that includes Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Rauschenberg established his indexical competency extremely early, in collages and collaborations with his wife-to-be Susan Weil in 1949. Johns' works with body casts launched a critique of the masculinist modernism embodied by Pollock by stripping the index of all libidinal charge, rendering a deadened and neutralized sign of negated desire. By 1960 both Manzoni and Yves Klein had likewise taken up the indexical body with marked enthusiasm and, despite their surface similarities, to ends as different as Duchamp and Pollock's. But over the course of this brief historical development the body in its indexicality was radically transformed:

from a post-surrealist body invested with the vagaries of desire to a post-humanist body invested with the mechanisms of power. By the time Andy Warhol took it up, the corporeal index had been irrevocably altered, inscribed indelibly within a regime of spectacularized biopolitics.

If this first section of the chapter is preoccupied with regimes of surveillance in Manzoni's work, the next section looks to a complementary visual axis, namely spectacle. I analyze an under-studied work of Manzoni's entitled the *Placentarium*, a giant pneumatic theater that he designed in 1960 but never executed. In the shape of an egg, the theater is linked morphologically and iconographically to the most well-known of Manzoni's fingerprint works, the *Uova* of the same year. Although artists from Frederick Kiesler through Lucio Fontana to Yves Klein all projected visions of an Icarian subject, soaring through space and communing with an oceanic infinite, Manzoni confines his subjects bodily into a constricting architecture of administrated spectacle. Despite the appearance of imagistic abstraction that often attends spectacular relations, Manzoni's theater demonstrates the corporeal conditions of spectacle, an embodied allegory of postwar image culture. The *Placentarium* also constructs a nexus of both spectacle and surveillance, since its architectural form offers an uncanny inversion of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, the carceral gaze turned inside-out, as it were.

The final section of this first and lengthy chapter unearths a largely ignored proposal of Manzoni's for an electronic Labyrinth, a system of chambers and corridors that would challenge the participant with a series of frightening obstacles. In his last published text, the artist noted that the work would be "useful for psychological experiments and brainwashing," the unmistakable signs of behaviorist manipulation. If

the subject of the fingerprinted Uova was locked into its body through the study of its unique anatomies, and if the subject of the Placentarium was enclosed bodily within a site of enforced viewership, then the subject in the Labyrinth becomes the body in a behaviorist maze, surrendering her subjectivity and her unconscious to the machinations of a nightmarish apparatus. I place the work within a genealogy of the Labyrinth topos in previous generations of the avant-garde to demonstrate Manzoni's radical reversal of this time-honored topos: under Manzoni's behaviorist renovation, the architecture of the Labyrinth mutates from the site of subjectivity-formation to the site of subjectivity-destruction.

Chapter Two presents a vision of spectatorial participation only slightly sunnier than in the Labyrinth. In 1961 Manzoni executed a series of works in which the institutional and bureaucratic apparatus of traditional sculpture—the base, the signature, the certificate of authenticity—turn the bodies of both spectator and artist into readymades. In January of that year, in front of newsreel cameras, he signed partially-nude women as *Living Sculptures*, verified with a special certificate. Soon thereafter, he began signing certificates for dozens of people, men and women alike, himself included. Next he developed a group of works called the *Magic Bases*, each of which consisted of a small sculptural plinth that converts whatever is on top of it into a work of art. The first *Magic Base* is designed to turn human bodies into sculptures, the second is ideal for converting both people and objects, and the third, a giant parallelepiped upside-down, declares itself the *Socle du monde* (*The Base of the World*). This series of works therefore unfolds according to a logic of increasing and even imperialist expansion. Beginning with the objectification of one specific subject-position, namely women, the

reifying machinations of the bodily readymade begin to accommodate a range of bodies, both human and nonhuman, eventually absorbing the entire planet as a readymade.

The origins of this project in a performative spectacle (newsreel) allows Manzoni to sign the death warrants of two linked philosophies of bodily liberation: the classical body, on the one hand, and the grotesque-carnavalesque on the other. Following the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Herbert Marcuse, these aesthetic systems are traditionally opposed to one another, and yet Manzoni closes the door on both. The Living Sculptures travesty classical sculpture, and the *Socle du monde* mocks the utopian aspirations of the carnivalesque, the principal emblem of which was the “world upside down.” In between, the practice of the readymade, once a critical tactic of avant-garde progressivism, is shown to be perfectly amenable to the requirements of advanced capital and its spectacularized social relations.

Chapter Four examines Manzoni’s use of synthetic materials, plastics in particular, many of which were relatively new to science at the time. Although the organizing principle of artistic materials cuts through genre here, this chapter focuses most heavily on the Achromes, particularly those that have largely escaped critical attention, like those made of polystyrene, nylon, acrylic, or fiberglass.²³ Some glow in the dark, while others respond to changes in the weather. I argue that Manzoni’s materials, in their technical and morphological elaboration, balance a dialectic of syntheticity and organicity in which both terms are mutually imbricated.

Plastics of all kinds play major roles in Manzoni’s work. Although some artists at the time could imagine these wholly artificial materials as having no history, I situate the

²³ A notable exception is Briony Fer’s “Series” in *The Infinite Line: Remaking Art After Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 37-42. Although her comments are fairly brief on the subject, she conducts an excellent analysis of synthetics in Manzoni’s work.

development of plastics and their deployment in the Italian design culture of the economic miracle in order to anchor the significance of plastics for Manzoni in his cultural and historical time and place. If the *Socle du monde* pointed to a global reification, plastics signaled a global syntheticity, an epochal shift after which the related notions of “the organic” and “the natural” held truth value no longer—an industrialized Götterdämmerung of nature itself whose effects today are all too clear as climate change and worldwide ecological devastation.

Each of the first three chapters collates multiple works from Manzoni’s oeuvre, but Chapter Four focuses directly on a single work—also made of plastic—which the artist was developing in the last months of his life. The piece takes the form of a book, a slim monograph entitled *Piero Manzoni: Life and Works*. The book is little-studied, probably because it deliberately subverts its own legibility on several levels. First of all, the cover proclaims the publisher (one Jes Petersen) to be the author instead of Manzoni, a clever substitution which, though philosophically consequential, has deliberately subverted the archival categorization of this work. Secondly, the book is totally blank on the inside. Third, its pages are composed entirely of transparent acetate. Adding to its archival difficulties, the first edition of the book from 1963 is extremely rare; the Manzoni Archive in Milan knows of only a single copy in existence.

I frame *Life and Works* in four contexts. First, it must be catalogued within the library of artist’s books that were made in its era, from Yves Klein’s book of false monochromes to Dieter Rot’s minimalized volumes with hole-punched pages. Second, *Life and Works* participates in the Mallarméan legacy of typographical spacing, the radical reduction of the printed mark and the foregrounding of spatial gaps that begins

with his watershed *Un Coup de dés* (1897; first typeset printing 1914), which Broodthaers subsequently reworked in blacked-out type later in the sixties. Third, the book takes up the Duchampian mantle in several senses. It relates to two books by and/or about Duchamp, his *Unhappy Readymade* of 1919, and Pierre de Massot's *The Wonderful Book: Reflections on Rrose Sélavy* (1923), a monograph about Duchamp that is also largely blank. Apropos of monographs, Duchamp registered the inevitability of his own domesticating reception with *Boite-en-valise* (1935-40), a monographic collection of miniaturized reproductions of his major works enclosed in a carrying case like a portable, doll-sized museum. Like the *Boite*, *Life and Works* conceives of the work of art itself in the form of its own site of reception. Finally, I set the work against the discursive backdrop of *nothing*, the postwar fantasies of point-zero in various forms that re-imagined the modernist project of radical reduction in multiple and not always coherent ways. Since *Life and Works* is a book, the final section also draws on post-structuralist linguistics to overlay the Mallarméan legacy of literary spacing with the Duchampian critique of discursive reception. I argue that Manzoni's book rejects both the humanist tradition of man-and-his-work criticism and the artistic subjectivity it had once promulgated.

After the fourth chapter I have included a short coda, "Ten Notes on the *Pacchi*." Officially entries in the long series of Achromes, the *Pacchi* (or *Packages*), are a series of framed postal parcels that Manzoni made in 1962. Many of Manzoni's works withhold their contents in a logic of aesthetic withdrawal, but the *Pacchi* seem to revel with special emphasis in this visual inaccessibility because their contents are not only bound in paper and string, but also double-sealed with roundels of wax and lead. Since the form of the

eternally closed and physically arrested parcel negates associations of sending, transmission, and communication, I undertake a materialist reading of these works as breakdowns in these processes. Manzoni's Packages summarily deny us access to visuality, to communication, and to the past. These closed-up works also paradoxically deny us closure, and so the structure and rhetoric of this section is deliberately fragmentary and allusive. The note-form serves here as both a rhetorical expedient and a small gesture of resistance to the weighty assumptions of wholeness that a monographic dissertation inevitably generates.

Manzoni was nothing if not a critic of precisely this kind of mythic wholeness—of the subject, of the body, of the artist, of the work, and of the oeuvre—and in this spirit, the present dissertation offers no totalizing accounts. Neither Manzoni nor his work are exhausted here. Instead, these chapters set out to explore the interrelated constructs of the body, the self, and the subject in Manzoni's work, setting them in their aesthetic, philosophical, and historical contexts to bring out each term with the greatest possible complexity. What emerges is a darkly comic and radically pessimistic vision for the liberatory potentials of artistic practice, a vision of the decades to come that was foreseen with equal prescience only by Warhol, perhaps. I will return to Manzoni's rather bleak vision in the dissertation's conclusion.

Chapter One. Manzoni's Biopolitical Body

I. *Impronta pollice*

Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order.

*Michel Foucault*²⁴

I would like to see all artists selling their fingerprints...fingerprints are the only acceptable signature of the personality of the artist.

*Piero Manzoni*²⁵

In much of the Manzoni literature, the body is a ubiquitous figure. Sometimes lurking in the margins, it often enough assumes a central role in analysis, although usually as a derivative of itself: as transcendent corporeality, as part-object, as scatology, or even simply as texture. Art historians call upon the body's rebellious desires and organic indignities to resist the ascetic rigors of modernist rationalities, and Manzoni's excremental earthiness would certainly lend itself to this line of interpretation. As modernism's imagined other, the body provides a bulwark against positivist fantasies of control.²⁶ When art historians take it up as an analytic category, the body can confront modernist ascetism with libidinal drives, or dismantle the universal subject with the specificities of race and gender. It can serve as shorthand for the irrational, the passionate, the unruly indeterminacy that reassures us all that, despite the alienation of the labor process and the technologization of our world, the realm of art, if nowhere else,

²⁴ *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) p. 17.

²⁵ Manzoni, letter to Ben Vautier, Milan, December 1961, Battino and Palazzoli, p. 83.

²⁶ I borrow the term "imaged other" from Jaleh Mansoor's work on the category of the body in Manzoni. Jaleh Mansoor, "Piero Manzoni: We Want to Organicize Disintegration," *October* 95 (Winter 2001).

retains some measure of wholesome, natural selfhood. As a humanist category, the persistence of the body might even hint at the existence, despite all odds, of a transcendent humanity.

But what, then, do we make of Manzoni's fingerprint? This particular mark proliferates throughout his body of work, on paper, on eggs, on lithographs. He declared, in the epigraph above, that the fingerprint was the only acceptable form of signature, and that not only he, but all artists should begin to market them. Why should an artist valorize this, the most positivist of bodily imprints? What does it mean that an artist should designate this particular form of the evidentiary mark as the sole guarantor of his own selfhood?

In the existing literature on Manzoni, it is perhaps a preoccupying focus on the *Achromes*, admittedly his most prolific category of practice, that has occluded recognition of the biopolitical dimension of his work: the implication of the body, through the rationalistic assessment and control of its own biological conditions, into administrative systems of governmentality and enforced regimes of discipline.²⁷

Although it has experienced unprecedented academic enthusiasm over the past decade or so, the notion of biopolitics originates with Michel Foucault, and it is his understanding of the term, particularly as elaborated in his writing and lectures of the late 1970's, that is most relevant for Manzoni.²⁸ In the first volume of *The History of*

²⁷ Some of the best literature on Manzoni has dealt adequately with the *Achromes*. Jaleh Mansoor, for instance, frames the kaolin-slip canvases quite beautifully as dialectical critiques of modernism monochromy. While I do not necessarily want to quarrel with Mansoor's argument for the *Achromes* themselves, Manzoni's more radical works of art cannot be subsumed under a totalizing interpretive rubric dictated by the *Achrome* paintings alone. Cf. *ibid*.

²⁸ Even as they credit the notion to Foucault, some theoreticians of the past decade have creatively interpreted the term *biopolitics* in distinctly metaphysical directions, namely Giorgio

Sexuality, he describes a fundamental paradigm shift in the structures of sovereignty that obtained sometime in the eighteenth century, from the power to take life to the power to foster and manage it. Biopolitics addresses itself to the regulation of populations conceived as the living collectives of biological individuals, and thus a major component of this dynamic focused on the conditions of the individual body. Foucault explains the “anatomy-politics of the human body” operant in a swath of modern institutions, which

centered on the body as machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls...²⁹

I will argue that Manzoni’s practice articulates a sustained engagement with these same techniques of power. This is not to say that I want to map Foucault’s concepts directly onto Manzoni, nor the other way around. After all, Manzoni’s untimely death preceded publication of *The History of Sexuality* by some thirteen years. But like Foucault, Manzoni imagines the body in all its biological contingencies, enveloped in and determined by systems of power and knowledge that center on that biology.

Agamben and the team of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* associated the term with a metaphysically extreme condition of the body under the state of exception that he christened “bare life.” As Judith Butler has said, “Although Agamben borrows from Foucault to articulate a conception of the biopolitical, his thesis of ‘bare life’ remains untouched by that conception.” Cf. Butler’s “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>. Hardt and Negri propose a distinction between the *biopolitics* of Empire and the countervailing *biopower* of the multitude. These conceptual liberties, along with the widespread popular application of the term, initially generated more aporias than they dispelled. However, new translations of Foucault’s lecture series at the Collège de France (which continue to be published in French and English) have offered some clarification of his intentions, and recent, more rigorous scholarship has restored the critical force of his criteria. For a history of the notion, including a critical analysis of Agamben and Hardt/Negri, see Thomas Lemke’s *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, trans. Eric Frederick Trump (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 139.

Foucault first theorizes the emergence of biopolitics in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1978-79. He grounds biopolitics within the economic history of liberalism, or more precisely, the twin neoliberalisms of the twentieth century: the anarcho-liberalism of the American Chicago school and the ordo-liberalism under development in West Germany. Foucault becomes so engrossed in his discussion of the latter, in fact, that it prevents him from explaining biopolitics proper in his lectures.

What makes all this so central to our understanding of Manzoni's work is that the artist was exposed to precisely this line of neoliberal thought during his studies as a youth. His essay "L'Economia del carnifici" ("The Economy of Butchery") mounts a polemical attack on the "planned economies" of communism and socialism by taking the part of German ordoliberal economists Jacob Burckhardt and Wilhelm Roepke. Sure enough, Foucault devotes considerable time to discussing Roepke and his colleagues in his lectures on the birth of biopolitics. Although Manzoni's political affiliation would shift over time (his uncle would later express horror that Manzoni may have voted communist), his early, conscious identification with the market aspirations of German ordoliberals finds expression in his later practice as biopolitical interpellation. The subject in Manzoni's work is constituted within the terms of liberal corporeality, which paradoxically enough embodies the very same unfreedoms he decries as socialistic in his Butchery essay.

Manzoni's notion of biopolitical subjectivity is also enmeshed in a system of relations that would come to be called the spectacle, a theory which Foucault famously rejected. Though the spectacle is often blamed for a totalizing abstraction, Manzoni's production demonstrates how alienation operates directly on the physical body itself. A

central avatar for this notion in Manzoni's practice is the fingerprint, the classic mark of corporeal uniqueness and the very emblem of biological personhood.³⁰ Appropriately enough, the message often comes enclosed in an organic object: the egg—many eggs, to be precise, in two forms. The first are the *Uova*, a series of hardboiled eggs that Manzoni imprinted with his thumbprint. The second is the *Placentarium*, a design for a theater. The humble egg—quotidian, domestic, and fragile—serves as the architecture for a startling complementarity between systems of surveillance and relations of the spectacle.

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first section will undertake a topology of the fingerprint in Manzoni's body of work. The next two sections are dedicated to related projects that exist only in proposal or prototype: the egg-shaped theater called the *Placentarium* in the second section, and an "electronic labyrinth" in the third.

In order to read Manzoni's fingerprint it will be necessary to situate it within two intersecting historical developments: first, the legacy of biometric techniques which, beginning in the 19th century, first linked fingerprints conclusively to bodily identity, and second, the aesthetic practice of bodily imprints in the postwar period. As will become clear, these dual trajectories, at first only loosely parallel, suddenly cross one other at the turn of the sixties, most saliently in Manzoni's work, but in the work of other artists as well. What these entwined genealogies suggest is a specific history of the kind of sign we might call the corporeal index.

³⁰ As historian Simon Cole has written, "...fingerprinting has embedded firmly in our culture the notion that personhood is biological." Simon A. Cole, *Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 5.

I must beg the reader's indulgence if this genealogical tree splits into a somewhat lengthy series of bifurcating branches. The category of the corporeal index, for all its specificity, is capable of an enormous range of signification. To articulate its development both in history and in aesthetic practice will allow Manzoni's particular form of the body-trace to emerge in all its complexity.

Criminal Bodies: Three Techniques of Identification

Although the existence of patterned ridges on the fingertips had been known for centuries, it is only in the modern era that this type of sign became conclusively linked to the individuation of bodies. The fingerprint is ineluctably modern, a most modern sign of selfhood; it signifies selfhood in and by means of its historical specificity. The fingerprint cannot mean "self" outside of or before the advent of the technologies of the self that render the body legible as code. That coded touch inscribes the body and its self in an inescapable web of language and history. As will become clear in the following brief history of the technique, fingerprinting, also called *dactyloscopy*, jockeyed with two other forms of bodily identification—the photographic mug-shot and anthropometric measurement—before becoming the very metonym for identity itself.

Fingerprinting first emerges as a verifiable method of positive identification from the annals of Western police science in the nineteenth century. As the industrial revolution rumbled its way across the Western world, mass-migrations to throbbing metropolitan centers dissolved premodern localities and initiated unprecedented instabilities of social relations and traditional identity. New needs emerged for the

management of vast numbers of densely-populated cities and the anonymous persons inhabiting them. Faced with these new realities, agents of state power began to turn their attention to the criminal body itself: it had to be studied, measured, disciplined. Fears of rising recidivism in urban centers required the dual strategies of positive identification (to discover the recidivist) and rehabilitation (to reform behavior).³¹ Confronted with the phenomenon of the repeat offender and the persistent difficulty of identification, forces of state power devised and revised a number of systems in the concerted effort to distinguish one body from the next, conclusively and over time and space. Branding had been a common enough practice under the previous regimes, but since Enlightenment legalities of personal liberty proscribed mark-making on the criminal body itself, the stable peculiarities of individual anatomies became the objects of observation, categorization, and archival cataloguing.

The physiognomy, that traditional seat of selfhood prized in bourgeois portraiture, initially promised a solution. Rudimentary efforts began in the late eighteenth century, as European police departments drew on the talents of officers with exceptional visual recall to record the criminal face mnemonically.³² Although experiments with the physiognotrace were rejected, the advent of photography ushered in an explosion of enthusiastic image-making in the emergent fields of criminology, as “rogues galleries” of wanted men and women suddenly cropped up across Western Europe and the United States. Although the photograph was initially hailed as the proof-positive solution to

³¹ Cole, *Suspect Identities*, p. 13-14. Cole draws the basis for his historical analysis from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995).

³² J. Edgar Hoover, “Criminal Identification,” *The American Journal of Police Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb., 1931), p. 8.

criminology's identification problem, its shortcomings soon became obvious. In his singular essay "The Body and the Archive," Alan Sekula traces the implementation of photography in techniques of criminal cataloging in the late 1800's. As photographic image-banks of criminals multiplied at an astonishing rate, there arose the need to efficiently archive these vast inventories, since enormous volumes of criminal portraits were near-impossible to search in the absence of a filing system. Faithful optical records were not enough; these images and the techniques of their production had to be systematized and standardized. As Sekula writes, "The central artifact of this system is not the camera but the filing cabinet."³³



Figure 7. Alphonse Bertillon. Bertillonage card for Alphonse Bertillon. N.D.

The champion of the filing cabinet in this connection was Alphonse Bertillon, the director of the Identification Bureau of the Paris Prefecture of Police (Fig. 7). Bertillon, whom Sekula describes as "more a social engineer, an inventive clerk-technician than a criminologist,"³⁴ devised a complex system of anthropometric data collection, notation, and classification that united physical

measurements of the body, notational codes, photographic portraiture, and statistically-based storage techniques. The system was so successful that within a decade of its official sanction in France, "Bertillonage" and its derivatives were standard practice in

³³ Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in ed. Richard Bolton, *The Contest of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 351; originally published in *October*, Vol. 39 (Winter 1986), pp. 3-64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 357

police stations across most of Europe and America.³⁵ The system subjected the criminal body to a lengthy and rigorous series of measurements.³⁶



Figure 8. Alphonse Bertillon. Studies of Ears. N.D.

In addition to standardizing body measurement, the Bertillon system was also famous for its obsessive study of the morphology of the ear, which was translated into a complex notational code and noted on the Bertillon card along with the bone measurements and other details of the face and head (Fig. 8).

The ultimate record remained the photographic one, but the anthropometric information, classed as it was into standardized categories according to its relation to statistical averages, provided an efficiently-searchable

³⁵ Ibid., p. 362

³⁶ Bertillon invented a complicated system whereby measurements of the criminal body could be recorded and catalogued according to statistical norms. To each photographic mugshot, Bertillon appended a card containing a tripartite system of bodily identification: anthropometric measurements, description of the face, and notation of peculiar marks. The intricate details of the system were published in the book *Signaletic Instructions*, which was rapidly translated into several languages and distributed throughout Europe and North America in the 1880's and 90's. Upon arrest, the suspect would be subject to eleven different measurements of the body: height, head length, head breadth, arm span, sitting height, left middle finger length, left little finger length, left foot length, left forearm length, right ear length, and cheek width. These were bodily proportions based on skeletal structures that Bertillon deemed least likely to change over the adult life of an individual, an observation that perhaps derived from his brief medical training. Once the measurements were meticulously observed and recorded on standardized Bertillon cards, the cards could be filed quantitatively in an enormous filing cabinet according to their deviation from a statistical mean. After separation by sex, the cards were filed in three groups by head length: small, medium, and large—that is, below average, average, and above average. Distributed along the bell-curve in a growing archive of individuals, the three categories remained equally populated. The cards could then be progressively subclassified by head breadth, then middle finger length, and so on through all eleven categories of measurement, and then finally subdivided through fifty categories of eye-color. Cf. Alphonse Bertillon, *Signaletic Instructions: Including the Theory and Practice of Anthropometrical Identification*, trans. R.W. McClaughry (New York: The Werner Company, 1896).

database for the filing of photographs in the dossier. Sekula describes the textualization of the body:

For Bertillon, the mastery of the criminal body necessitated a massive campaign of *inscription*, a transformation of the body's signs into a *text*, a text that pared verbal description down to a denotative shorthand, which was then linked to a numerical series. Thus Bertillon arrested the criminal body, determined its identity as a body that had already been defined as a criminal, by means that subordinated the image—which remained necessary but insufficient—to verbal texts and numerical series.³⁷

In quiet but persistent competition with the anthropometric analyses advanced by Bertillon, however, was the system that would eventually supplant it entirely: the “science” of *dactyloscopy*, or fingerprint analysis. Simon A. Cole authors a comprehensive and incisive account of the history of fingerprinting in *Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification*. He describes the parallel tracks of anthropometry and dactyloscopy, which both entered the criminological consciousness at about the same time. Whereas Bertillon's system originated in the cities of Western Europe, fingerprinting began first in the colonies. Around the time of the Sepoy Mutiny in 1858 the chief administrative officer in the Hooghley British colonial district of Bengal, India, one Sir William Herschel,³⁸ alighted on the usefulness of fingerprints for identifying Indian pensioners, and for preventing impersonation and wrongful disbursement of pension funds.³⁹ At another British outpost in Asia, Henry Faulds, a

³⁷ Sekula, p. 360, emphasis in original

³⁸ Not to be confused with his father John Herschel, eminent scientist and subject of a portrait by Julia Margaret Cameron (see note 26 below).

³⁹ Rehearsing the racist cliché that inflected much of the development of fingerprinting, Cole writes, “[The Indians] succeeded in this deception because the British officials responsible for

physician working in Tokyo, published observations of papillary ridges in the journal *Nature* in 1880.⁴⁰ Faulds was the first to declare the uniqueness of fingerprints, the first to suggest their use in solving crimes, and the first to develop a rudimentary system for their classification. In both anthropometry and dactyloscopy, as Sekula and Cole both affirm, the task is not only to uncover uniqueness, but also to classify vast archives of data for quick retrieval. Faulds wrote about his findings to Charles Darwin, who forwarded the letter to his industrious cousin, Francis Galton, the future father of eugenics. Galton became instantly absorbed, and eventually developed the system of classification on which today's dactyloscopy is mostly based, in which prints are grouped by four basic forms: arch, tent, loop, and whorl.⁴¹ These forms, along with later addition of the "core" and "delta" ridge-formations, could be denoted in shorthand and filed accordingly, like Bertillon's system but with much less time and effort.⁴²

The other obvious benefit of the fingerprint, which it held over anthropometry and photography alike (until surveillance cameras), was its capacity to tie the criminal body

disbursing pensions could not tell one Indian from another."³⁹ The Bertillon system would not have solved the (perceived) problem, since it ultimately relied on correlating photographic likenesses, which colonial officers insisted were homogeneous for the subject population. Herschel began to collect fingerprint impressions from the pensioners. The interpenetration of the twin systems (Bertillon vs. dactyloscopy) forms a coincidental link in Herschel, since his father, John Herschel, had helped William Henry Fox Talbot to invent his negative-positive technique of photography. See Cole, *Suspect Identities*, p. 64.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 73

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-80.

⁴² Ultimately, dactyloscopy proved a faster and more dependable system than anthropometry, partially because of inevitable irregularities in Bertillon's measuring system (particularly when it was exported), and partially because the technique of impressing fingerprints required far less expertise. Cole summarizes the differences: "Anthropometry looked like science; fingerprinting looked like technology. Anthropometry was observational; fingerprinting was mechanical. Anthropometry evoked the rigors of scientific observation; fingerprinting evoked the efficiencies of mass production." Technological, mechanical mass production: dactyloscopy became the penal system's answer to Ford. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

to the scene of the crime. The very same marks that would be inked on a criminal's record card could also be found, left involuntarily, on every surface the suspect's hand had touched. The natural oils of the fingertips, secreted along unique patterns of papillary ridges, inscribed damning yet invisible testimony wherever the body went. Through its own distinct anatomical properties, the body could thus be forced to testify for the prosecution. Rather than provide the surface upon which the reprisals of sovereign power are written and displayed for public control, the body under the biopolitical logic of police science is seen to be always-already marked. Rather than receive the marks of criminality like the tortured man on the scaffold, the biopolitical body automatically makes the marks—both upon itself and upon its environment—that speak its culpability.

It is perhaps greatest irony of the modern body that the proof positive of its own unique unrepeatability, the first scientific proof of biological uniqueness, should be the very thing that offers it up to systems of surveillance and control.

The Corporeal Index

From a semiotic point of view, dactyloscopy—like its sister-systems anthropometry and mug-shots—must be called indexical. When a hand or a foot leaves behind its trace—in sand, paint, or ink, for example—the resulting mark is categorized as a special type of sign: the index. As has become well-known in art history, the notion of the index derives from the work of American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. In the 19th century Peirce developed a tripartite taxonomy of sign-types.⁴³ The three major types of signs—icon, symbol, and index—may be distinguished from one

⁴³ C.S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 2011), pp. 98-119.

another based on the modes by which they link a sign to its referent. Icons, like traditional painted portraits for example, establish a relationship of resemblance between sign and referent. The sign correlates to its object according to a logic of mimesis. Symbols, like most words, depend on wholly conventional systems of correlation, the most obvious examples of which are languages. Symbols bear no logical or mimetic relationship to their referent, but instead are linked to their objects by means of historically and culturally specific sets of customs and conventions. An index, like a bullethole or tracks in the snow, can claim a causal relationship to its referent. The index leads us back to the thing that produced it (physically, chemically, or otherwise): smoke indicates the presence of fire, dust accumulation indicates the passage of time, and a fever indicates the processes of disease.

Peirce's tripartite system, usually tempered with the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, has proven remarkably fruitful for the study of art history. Rosalind Krauss is generally credited with introducing this terminology most productively within the discipline. In her famous argument about Cubism, for example, she demonstrates that works of art from roughly the Renaissance to the advent of modernism were defined specifically and often quite strictly by their iconic character. In Picasso's collage, however, the signifier becomes unmoored from the iconic motivation to which it had long been tethered; the sign is no longer forced to make reference to the world according to visual resemblance.⁴⁴ Instead, so Krauss' argument goes, Picasso's cubist collage moves the signifying practice of art fully into the symbolic register. In other words, in the modern era, art can be structured like a language. Another famous

⁴⁴ Rosalind Krauss, "The Motivation of the Sign," *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), pp. 261-286.

essay of Krauss' draws our attention to the indexical character of some works of art, especially in Duchamp's practice. In "Notes on the Index" of 1976, Krauss alights on the index as a way to discuss the varied forms that art seemed to be taking in the seventies. The index proves a handy criterion to cut through popular claims of "pluralism," and to establish structural links between art of the seventies and Duchamp's work, which pioneered indexicality in the 1910's, shortly after Picasso's symbolic revolution. All readymade can be read as indexes, Krauss contends, because they register a choice (a designation, an indication) by the artist to select this object (as opposed to that one) to be named a work of art. Krauss herself points to Duchamp's mural-sized horizontal painting *Tu m'* (1918) as a panorama of the index, screening cast shadows and indicating fingers among the traces of the readymades.⁴⁵

Although both of Krauss' arguments declare themselves to be written in the service of a periodization (e.g. When does Cubism begin? At what moment did art break free of the Albertian paradigm? How do we talk about an era of art that seems to lack consistent form or coherent movements?), they are far more useful in providing analytic criteria. Indexicality may indeed have flourished in the seventies, but in the years since Krauss' watershed essay, it has become clear that the index is a category with incredibly broad application in twentieth-century artistic practice, not least in the decade leading up to Manzoni's work. As a mode of semiotic relationality, however, the index is fully imbricated in the specificities of its historical articulation and moment of appearance. In order to situate Manzoni's thumbprint, it will be necessary to excavate the history of aesthetic indexicality that preceded it.

⁴⁵ Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index, Part 1," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 198-199.

In what follows, I trace the postwar history of a particular subset of indexes, namely those that register the imprint of the human body. We might call this specific sign the corporeal index. The development I describe here is not intended to be totalizing, but rather to chart the genealogical origins of corporeal indexicality for Manzoni and his contemporaries, a discursive history of bodily imprints in advanced aesthetic practice from 1946 to about 1964. As will become clear, corporeal indexicality changes drastically over this period of time, from a post-surrealist trace pregnant with libidinal force, to a neutralized cast of negated desire, and finally to a biopolitical stamp, constrained within spectacular relations.

The Libidinal Trace

Around 1945, Marcel Duchamp and his mistress, the surrealist sculptor Maria Martins, began to make secret pilgrimages to the uptown studio of the artist Ettore Salvatore.⁴⁶ Salvatore, an Italian expat teaching at Columbia University, was an expert in body casting, and was known to use traditional methods derived from Cennino Cennini's *The Craftsman's Handbook* (c. 1400). The final section of Cennini's manual is devoted exclusively to body casting, with sections "How to Take a Life Cast," "How to Cast this Waste Mold," and "How to Cast Whole Figures." Although the specific details of their pilgrimages remains obscure, it appears that Duchamp and Martins were taking private lessons from this old-master master in precisely these techniques. One result of their meetings is plain: in the mid-forties, Salvatore made a life-mask of Duchamp, his visage frozen for posterity in pale plaster.

⁴⁶ Michael R. Taylor, "The Genesis, Construction, Installation, and Legacy of a Secret Masterwork," in *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009), p. 61.

Over the following months, Duchamp would begin to make casts of Martins' torso and limbs, especially her most intimate and erogenous body parts: her genitals, her hands, and her breasts. Their artistic collaboration remained unknown for many years, not so much because of the illicit nature of their romance—Martins was married with several children—but rather because of the secret masterwork for which these casts were the initial steps: Duchamp's monumental *Étant donnés*, which would not be completed and installed until more than twenty years later.

According to recent research undertaken by conservators and art historians at the Philadelphia Museum of Art where the completed work is installed, the central mannequin in the diorama began in 1946 as casts taken from Martin's body. From available evidence, it appears that the initial positive casts were taken in plastilene, a malleable material that allowed Duchamp to mold together a collection of part-objects into a continuous figure. Duchamp then brought the full plastilene figure to Salvatore, who made a cast replica in plaster, which Duchamp in turn worked over laboriously, erasing the seams of casting to achieve a luminous smoothness. Over this headless plaster body, visible now only in a beautiful photograph from 1949, Duchamp draped a translucent sheet of wet cowskin, pressing it over the figure so that upon drying, it took on every detail of the body's shape. This process of skin-pressing generated a number of enigmatic sculptures that Duchamp would exhibit over the next decades under the collective title "Erotic Objects." The three best-known include *Feuille de vigne femelle* (*Female Fig Leaf*) (1950), *Coin de chasteté* (*Wedge of Chastity*) (1954), and *Objet-dard* (*Dart Object*) (1951) (Figs. 9-11). These small sculptures originate as fragments of a broken countermold that Duchamp used to squeeze the skin into the recesses of the

plaster figure. It is this skin in the shape of a woman's body would later become the mannequin in *Étant donnés*.⁴⁷

What the technical production entailed, in other words, was a dizzying proliferation of indexes and their indexical descendents. Each successive trace is further removed from the originary body, an endless, obsessive process of indexical deferral. Duchamp pushes the process even further, however, when he orders a series of replicas of the Erotic Objects over the following decade. Duchamp delighted in the allusive confusion that resulted, especially in the strangely skewed and unsated libidinal trace that the Erotic Objects retained.



Figure 9. Marcel Duchamp. *Feuille de vigne femelle* (Female Fig Leaf), 1950.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 231-233.



Figure 10. Marcel Duchamp. *Coin de chasteté* (Wedge of Chastity). 1954

As the name “erotic objects” suggests, Eros is centrally at stake in this complicated process of casting and re-casting. In his letters to Martins, Duchamp describes the figure as “lascivious” [*lascive*], a “hussy” [*gourgandine*], and “Our Lady of Desire,” as though the artificial figure served a substitutive role, an erotic stand-in in the mode of Hans Bellmer’s *Poupée*. He worked to endow the figure with a skin color “as *natural* as possible,” and between the pinkish hues with which he experimented, he struggled against an “overly fondant color.”⁴⁸

Of course, Duchamp’s model of eroticism was confined to a tight sphere of personal and even obsessively private practice, and shared little with the revolutionary

⁴⁸ Linking artistic praxis to an erotic liberation, Duchamp’s letters to Martins impute to the project, and to Martins’ own sculpture, a private salvific power. Decrying the “cage” of their social entanglements, Duchamp writes, “as we have always said, the way out is your sculpture and my woman with the open pussy [*chat ouvert*]. But the main thing is to repeat it like a litany, or more like a prayer, every morning and every evening. Before leaving I had very nearly finished my woman’s hand.” Marcel Duchamp letter to Maria Martins, April 7, 1949, in *ibid.*, p. 409.

hopes of the Surrealism, the movement that Duchamp had provisionally supervised during its wartime tenure in New York. The surrealists dreamed of reorganizing consciousness through works of art and literature that would release repressed libidinal force in everyday experience. They hoped that a cultural movement of psycho-erotic shocks could precipitate social and political revolution, destroy fascism, and bring about a new socialist collectivity. Duchamp, however, had investigated eroticism long before the surrealists had signed their first manifesto, and he had always abjured politics. Witnessing first-hand the collapse of surrealism's political aspirations in the face of geopolitical displacement and global military conflagration, Duchamp can have had few doubts, as André Breton and his remaining coterie returned to lukewarm reception in France, that the age of utopian avant-gardism had come to a close.

But within the private ambit of Duchamp's practice, the painstaking development of the mannequin—and the various sculptural objects that were generated in its production process—retained an ambiguous erotic charge. “Even work is a sexual stimulant,” he wrote to Martins, “instead of turning our attention away from the physiological.” Freud had linked artistic labor to sublimation, the psychic process by which the subject's drives can be re-routed from their genital telos, displaced from the object of sexual desire to fuel more socially productive activities. Conversely, however, Duchamp's practice from the late forties on only amplifies eroticism, returning the subject again and again to the body, to “the physiological,” and consequently to the somatic and libidinal conditions of all activity, even and especially artistic labor. After all, it is in 1946, right at the beginning of this decades-long process of indexical execution, that Duchamp produces his most abjectly corporeal indexes of all: the

infamous *Paysage-fautif* (*Faulty Landscape*), a biomorphic splotch of his own semen on cheap black Astralon, and *Untitled*, a spare pencil sketch of a man's body—complete with erect penis—onto which he adhered small bunches of human hair in the appropriate positions: head, underarm, and pubic regions. Never had the body left its traces in art quite as frankly as in these one-offs, which Duchamp included in the deluxe edition of *Boite-en-valise* that he gave to Martins and to Roberto Matta, respectively.

Amorous though these indexes may be, the bodies produced in the stimulating labor always seem to turn against the very eroticism they mobilize. The hair collage and semen painting repulse at least as much as they attract, for example. More explicitly in the “Erotic Objects,” we find signifiers for sexualized body parts condensed with unmistakable signs of sexual frustration. Duchamp took these casts of the mannequin's creases in order to press the drying vellum into its most intimate crevices, assuring a tight fit. As a result, however, the objects' morphological relation to the body is both evocative and oblique. *Chastity Wedge* (Fig. 8), for example, which was used to press the skin into the vaginal cleft of the mannequin, is imbedded in a fleshy mound of dental plastic. Even as its logic of this-into-that cites the protocols of intercourse, its title and form evoke blockage, stoppage, and access denied.

Feuille de vigne femelle (*Female Fig Leaf*) (Fig. 9), the most widely circulated of these sculptures, was also produced as a negative cast of the mannequin's genitals, but its strange concavity reminded some viewers of buttocks as much as a vulva, particularly since the figure from which it originated would remain a secret for almost a generation. Displaced both physically and technically from the wholeness of the body, these part objects were difficult to place. The title Fig Leaf links the piece to a pictorial and

sculptural tradition of genital censorship, the obligatory *pudica* that had blocked visual access to the vagina in the genre of the nude (with interruptions) since Praxiteles' Aphrodite of Knidos.

Duchamp delighted in the game of positive-negative, inside-outside, male-female, the phenomenon he sometimes called the “infra-thin.”⁴⁹ Processes of erotic, somatic, and morphological inversion, already mobilized by the exigencies of casting itself, is yet redoubled when Duchamp had the *Fig Leaf* photographed for the cover of *le surréalisme, même* in 1956: he reversed the image, such that this concave conundrum became a confounding convexity, teasing the viewer with a range of somatic hints and erotic suggestion while emphatically denying the satisfaction of conclusive referentiality. In the photograph, the linear crack at its center takes on a curiously whitish hue, as though the



Figure 11. Marcel Duchamp.
Objet-dard (Dart Object). 1951

two halves of this opening had been glued shut.

The third Erotic Object that circulated during the fifties was *Objet-Dard*, or *Dart-Object*, a pun on the French words *objet d'art* and *dard* (slang for penis), or the English *dart*, the phallicism of a small projectile (Fig. 9).

Though it was made from the depression under the mannequin's left breast, the downward curve of the object resembles nothing so much as a semi-flaccid penis, and therefore a confusion of crease and protrusion becomes a conflation of male and female erogenous zones. The droopy softness of the penis is further complicated, however, since its plaster

⁴⁹ Cf. Helen Molesworth, ed., *Part Object-Part Sculpture* (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2005), p. 29 for a more detailed analysis of the “*infra-mince*” (or “infra-thin”) in the Erotic Objects.

shaft is reinforced with a rod of lead, as though locking the object into a fixed state of half-arousal and obdurate impotence.

In *Étant donnés*, the finished mannequin remains bizarrely distorted, its truncated limbs sprawling from a headless body, with one weird snarl of blonde hair descending onto its pallid neck. Its genitals have become famous for their curiously elided quality, hairless as they are and conspicuously lacking both clitoris and labia minora. Its arm is too large for its body, a distortion resulting from an accident: after a hot summer had destroyed the original arm, Duchamp was forced to take a new set of casts from his wife Teeny in 1959, the same year he produced the imprints of his own body for *With My Tongue in My Cheek* and *Torture-morte*.

Assembled together in positive articulation, this cast-derived body of the mannequin is all the more uncanny for its referentiality, the trace of presence that is the unique purview of indexical traces. Duchamp called the mannequin “direct sculpture,” and praised its fidelity to the body whose imprint it registers: “I have also put the severed leg under the skin,” he told Martins, “It is marvelous—it is your leg and of such beauty!”⁵⁰ It is this same miraculous illusion of presence that had attracted the surrealists to indexicality, usually in the form of the photograph. As Rosalind Krauss has explained,

Surrealist photography exploits the special connection to reality with which all photography is endowed. For photography is an imprint or transfer of the real; it is a photochemically processed trace causally connected to that thing in the world to which it refers in a manner parallel to that of fingerprints or footprints...on the family tree of images it is closer to palm prints, death masks, the Shroud of Turin...For technically and semiologically speaking...photographs are indexes.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Étant donnés*, pp. 417 and 423.

⁵¹ Rosalind Krauss, “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” in *Originality of the Avant-Garde*, p. 110.

All of Duchamp's casts, these various turns on the corporeal index, derive special status from this proximity to the real, the privileged access to presence that makes indexical traces equally suitable as evidentiary documents and as psychically invested artifacts. Early photography, after all, was read as both positivistically precise and magically spiritual.

What distinguishes Duchamp's model of the corporeal index, however, is that even as these objects retain the promise of erotic access and libidinal charge, that promise is forever deferred in a seemingly endless process of technical reproduction: these are always casts of casts, always a few steps removed from the thing itself (the body, the lover, erotic fulfillment, presence). The reproduction process preserves the erotic mystique of the body cast while simultaneously refracting its allure through a series of oscillations between positive and negative, impression and mold, male and female, body and trace, plaster "original" and editioned replica. These distorted part-objects might arouse erotic suspicions, but they never satisfy them. They flirt with magical presence only to stymie it every time.

During this same period, another artist in New York, Jackson Pollock, began to develop his own rather different practice of corporeal indexicality. Although art history traditionally separates Duchamp and Pollock as diametrically opposed, and although their overall projects are often theoretically incompatible, their bodies of work intersect here, at the bodily trace, in ways that have yet to be explored.

Pollock's corporeal index takes two major forms: the embodied gesturality of the drip technique, and the famous handprints on *Number 1, 1948* (1948) (Fig. 12).

As is well-known, Pollock tacked his canvases to the floor of his studio and dribbled paint onto its surface from the handle of a paintbrush or from a can of paint as he moved around the work from four sides. These deposits of paint render both linear elongations and globular gatherings. Pollock's drips hover between line and shape, suspended between a volumetric or planar object and the linear inscriptions whose chief function had traditionally been to signal a depicted object's spatial limit. The balance can be variously weighted in either direction: some Pollocks are a web of lines, while others flirt with volumes.



Figure 12. Jackson Pollock. Number 1, 1948. 1948.

What is at stake here is a particular kind of automatism, derived partly from Surrealism and yet materialized in the specific behaviors of paint and gravity. Pollock occasionally claimed total control over the operations he undertakes, and yet “control” here is a waltz with matter and physics. The artist altered the viscosity of his paints, thus

encouraging certain behaviors over others, and yet, succumbing to gravity, the drips embrace chance. Handled in this way, the paint's material properties determine its ultimate form, as, for example, where certain drips have dried in puddles with a wrinkled skin on them. Some paints are thin enough to have seeped into the canvas, altering its color yet not its surface texture, whereas others bulge out in volumetric encrustations, great frozen dollops and lumpy intersections. The accumulations of paint on a Pollockian drip painting are therefore indexical on several levels, corporeal and otherwise. Their very form tells us how they were made.

The indexicality of Pollockian drips is multiply overdetermined, since their formal articulation indicates a range of conditions, including the horizontal orientation of the canvas, the relative viscosity of the paint, and the aleatory conditions under which they fell and dried. Most saliently for early readers, however—and most germane to my discussion here—is another condition these skeins indexically track: the movement of the body that deposited them. As the paint runs off the end of Pollock's inverted brush, it moves smoothly along the arc of a moving arm, swiftly off the end of a flicked wrist, or in pools which gather below a body momentarily at rest. The athletic performance of drip execution in Hans Namuth's films and photographs of the Pollock at work cemented embodied movement and its registry in pigment as central aspects of the artist's legacy.⁵²

Pollockian inscription was understood in corporeal terms from its earliest reception, by none more enthusiastically than Harold Rosenberg. Rosenberg defined the new American vanguard as "Action Painting" in his often-quoted statement, "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in

⁵² For definitive accounts of Pollock and horizontality, see Chapter Six of Rosalind Krauss's *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), and also her entry "Horizontality," in Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

which to act...what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.” According to Rosenberg, this event was a kind of somatic performance, an athletic embodiment whose traces would be registered in the “arena” of canvas according to the movement of the artist’s body: “In its passage on the canvas each such line can establish the actual movement of the artist's body as an esthetic statement.”⁵³ Describing the painting as an intuitive and spontaneous encounter of body and materials, he writes, “Now, everything must have been in the tubes, *in the painter's muscles* and in the cream-colored sea into which he dives.”⁵⁴

For Rosenberg, as indeed for Pollock, these linear statements were not only phenomenologically complex, but psychically charged as well. Pollock made repeated reference to his painting’s origin in the unconscious, and in fact it is this idea alone that Pollock credits to the generation of “European moderns” residing in New York at the time, by which of course he meant the exiled surrealists.⁵⁵ But if surrealist automatism sought to explore the unconscious mind specifically in its properly erotic aspects—and with an eye to collective political aspirations—Pollock’s delineations (it was thought) receive and articulate the psychic individuality of their producer, a heroic and resolutely private struggle with the mystery of selfhood. The very paint itself, in having issued from the moving body of the artist, could be read as the physical precipitate of a psychic

⁵³ Rosenberg, “Hans Hoffman: Nature into Action,” as quoted in an editorial footnote to “American Action Painters” in *The Tradition of the New*, 2nd Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965). As reprinted in *The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience* (New York: Collier Books, 1964), the same statement reads “artist’s hand,” not artist’s body;” see p. 159; originally published in *Art News*, May 1957.

⁵⁴ Rosenberg, “American Action Painters” in *The Tradition of the New*, p. 25 (italics mine).

⁵⁵ Jackson Pollock, “Answers to a Questionnaire,” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, New Edition, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1992), p. 570.

and existential state. “The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence,”⁵⁶ argued Rosenberg, for whom an “action” was a sign both psychic and material.⁵⁷

Pollock also associated the movement of his body at work with both freedom and selfhood. Asked to explain the advantages of his innovative technique on the floor, Pollock replied, “Well, I’m able to be more free and to have greater freedom and move about the canvas, with greater ease.”⁵⁸ As he gracefully played his way around an emergent painting, Pollock’s somatic motility marked the manifest union of self and work, as in his famous statement that he was “in” the painting.⁵⁹

According to this type of reading, emblemized in both Rosenberg and Pollock himself, it is the movement of the body, a dance in the labyrinth of the unconscious, that emerges in deposited linear marks. As if describing the libidinal investment that would power such terpsichorean traces, Pollock said in an interview, “The modern artist, it seems to me, is working and expressing an inner world—in other words, expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces.”⁶⁰ The auratic potency of Pollock’s paintings issues from the libidinal drive of which they were thought to be both expression and residuum, a direct trace—or “direct painting,” as Pollock called them—that is only possible in the realm of the index.

⁵⁶ Rosenberg, “American Action Painters,” p. 28.

⁵⁷ Rosenberg, “Hans Hoffman: Nature Into Action,” p. 158.

⁵⁸ Jackson Pollock, “Interview with William Wright,” in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, p. 585.

⁵⁹ Pollock, “Answers to a Questionnaire,” p. 571.

⁶⁰ Jackson Pollock, “Interview with William Wright,” p. 584.

Convincing as it was to some at the time, this psychic mythmaking may be hard to swallow in retrospect. In this period of malaise for the American Left, Rosenberg skimmed off the top of psychoanalysis and existentialism to articulate a defense of abstraction as a liberation from the world through which an artist could discover and transcend his own selfhood, a rigorously individualist fantasy of aesthetic magic. Although Rosenberg and Pollock had both been affirmed Leftists as younger men, their mutual indulgence in masculinist myth, painterly faith, and the loose application of “freedom,” “action,” and “risk” supplied Cold War America (wittingly or not) with precisely the cultural ideology it had been waiting for.

From a less hagiographic but still at least provisionally psychoanalytic perspective, one could say that Pollock’s linear inscription signals a dialectic of sublimation and desublimation at stake in the mark-making process. If the sublimation of libidinal drives characterizes all socially acceptable activity, and if, for Freud, the artist’s labor is paradigmatic of this process, then Pollock’s drips mark the tension of transformation from libidinal energies to visual form. Executed in the bestial, prelinguistic axis of horizontality, the inscriptions dry there only to ascend ninety degrees to the erect orientation of the vertical, to face off visually against a bipedal viewer. This transition from material horizontality to optical verticality would later animate the formalist readings of Pollock by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, whose hegemonic modernist historicism would eclipse Rosenberg’s more psycho-existentialist interpretation. But what the Greenbergians miss is the resolute horizontality and materiality that remains indexically frozen within the vertical, as though modernist form could no longer disguise its origins in presublimated energies, as though the wall-space

devoted to transcendent opticality suddenly found itself dealing with gobs of matter. It should be said, however, that Pollock continued to mask the overtly sexual character of unconscious drives—the inevitable eros at the heart of painterly mark-making—which would not be more frankly explored until the canvases of Cy Twombly in the fifties.⁶¹

Pollock's most ostentatious index of his body came in the form of handprints in his canvases, most famously in *Number 1, 1948*, but also visible in *Lavender Mist* (1950). In the former, the handprint—partially obscured by the drips—is stamped out repeatedly in black paint at the top right-hand corner of the canvas, just at the place where the linear composition cedes its allover spread to the canvas support (Fig. 13). Handprints and drips both point us back to the body that made them, but the resolute stasis of the hands (even in their repetition) contrasts markedly with the slashes and droops of the Pollockian skeins. The handprint signals a moment of sustained contact and pressure, whereas the skeins' very formation depends on a body in motion. These two indexes diverge in their engagement with movement: the corporeal stamp is static, whereas the line is a gesture, fluid in space and time.

Both drip and handprint seethe with a specific form of energy derived also from their complicity in the heroic myth of the masculine heterosexual subject, the very avatar of the false universal. T.J. Clark helpfully draws our attention to the gendered character of the Pollockian mark, "For the drip paintings are clearly implicated in a whole informing metaphors of masculinity...space, scale, action, trace, energy...are all,

⁶¹ Krauss traces Twombly's critical reworking of Pollockian indexicality in *The Optical Unconscious*, pp. 250-266.

among other things, operators of sexual difference.”⁶² Clark puts particular emphasis on the handprints which, “proclaiming the artist’s physical being-there” strike a “self-assertive, heroizing” tone, particularly in Number 1, 1948.⁶³ It is clear in retrospect, and not least considering Pollock’s persistent critique in the gay generation that followed him, that not only the signifying arsenal of gender are at stake, but also and concomitantly the covert specificities of sexuality and its orientations.



Figure 13. Jackson Pollock. Number 1A, 1948 (detail). 1948

In its project of lifting the subject out of its social positionality and historical contingency, Pollock’s handprint summons an ur-index from the origins of humankind: the handprints in prehistoric cave paintings like Lascaux. This kind of vague citation of ancient or nonwestern cultures was typical of Abstract Expressionism generally, as in Pollock’s references to Native American art or Newman’s famous claim that “the first

⁶² T.J. Clark, “Jackson Pollock’s Abstraction,” in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 229.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

man was an artist.”⁶⁴ In this sense, indexicality promises a similar measure of totemic transfer that had been the goal of the first stages of primitivism in modern art. Weary of the bourgeois codes baked into the very execution of the painterly mark, artists like Gauguin and the pre-analytic Picasso had turned to nonwestern artistic traditions in the hopes of renovating their own. It was hoped that so-called “primitive” art, especially when imagined (by the bourgeois white male European artist) to be part of tribal ritual or cultic practice, could inject some cosmic force into modern painting, could disrupt the staid protocols of painterly tradition with the force of, say, totem and taboo.

Postwar forms of corporeal indexicality, especially Pollock’s, carry on this tradition in a mythology of painterly inscription. If the goal is to circumvent the verbal and visual languages of one’s own culture, then the index provides the perfect tool, since the form of this sign is defined precisely by its exteriority both to language *and* to mimesis. Intimately close to its referent, the index promises mythic access which is extra-linguistic, pre-verbal, and beyond (or before) any structure of resemblance. The index offers access to prehistory, to the humanist universal, and therefore an escape from history and its confinements—a liberatory promise that was especially tempting for a West still recovering from the trauma of war, and also for a nascent American avant-garde eager to slip the reins of their European forebears. If these were some of the functions of the index at mid-century, then it should come as no surprise that its referent is so often the body, the mind’s imagined opposite.⁶⁵ Predicated on a logic of cause-and-

⁶⁴ Barnett Newman, “The First Man was an Artist,” in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, p. 574.

⁶⁵ Again, I borrow this phrase from Mansoor, but I situate it here in a different context. Mansoor uses this phrase most generally to oppose “the body” to “modernism.” Although the body was certainly a repressed term in one specific lineage of modernist painting (the obvious example is Mondrian), the body and embodiment are absolutely central in many other modernist spaces, not

effect, however, the index also carries the weight of verifiability. Thus the totem, the mystical mark of the prelinguistic body, can be smuggled in with all the powerful bonafides of progressivist enlightenment. It is for this reason that Pollock's drips could be read simultaneously as a historicist project of epistemological critique (Greenberg) and a transhistorical project of psycho-existential action (Rosenberg).

Negated Desire

The generation of American artists who would subsequently inherit the techniques of corporeal indexicality would also serve as principal touchstones for Manzoni's later practice: the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns.

Rauschenberg exhibited an interest in the corporeal index quite early, in a remarkable series of collaborations with his wife Susan Weil in 1949. Drawing on his knowledge of Man Ray's rayographs and other photograms of prewar aesthetic practice (reinventions, all, of Henry Fox Talbot and Anna Atkins' cameraless photographs 19th century), Rauschenberg and Weil laid objects on photosensitive blueprint paper. Exposed to a lighting source, the resulting images could then be fixed with hydrogen peroxide. Documentary photographs from their process record a number of different objects laid on the paper, but no object is more frequent or more central than their own bodies. Usually it is Weil whose body leaves its ghostly traces on the deep cyan paper, lying prostrate within an allover field of leaves and flowers, or leaning on a cane to raise her leg balletically behind her. Technically embracing the horizontality that Pollock had

least Surrealist painting and the vast majority of New York School painting. In order to support the tension that Mansoor would like to construct between bodies and modern painting, we would need to confine the definition of "modernism" to Clement Greenberg's restricted definition of the "avant-garde."

pioneered, these images restore the figure to artistic practice in a way that troubles any spatial orientation, since the bodies seem to float in an abyss that is both sea and sky, field and plane.



Figure 14. Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil. *Blueprint (Female Figure)*. c. 1950

These images are also hauntingly, explosively auratic. The monoprints capture a mystified image of the body with a delirium not seen since the spirit photography of the preceding century. Anticipating (and outstripping) Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* by several years, one image in particular, *Female Figure (Blueprint)*, receives the impression of a woman's body—its hourglass torso, genital triangle, outstretched legs and raised-up arms—that is ensconced in a bluish aureole, as though light were radiating from her body (Fig. 14).

Rauschenberg would continue his exploration of indexicality and horizontality in many projects over the following years, in markedly different ways. Rauschenberg's *Automobile Tire Print*, a 1953 collaboration with Cage, established him as the undisputed master of indexicality in the early 1950's, and Leo Steinberg would later hail his "flatbed picture

plane” as the origin of post-modernism, a transition from nature to culture (according to Steinberg) in which the horizontal axis registers the multifarious imprints of the contemporary world. In John Cage’s famous reading, even the monochrome White Paintings of 1951 were viewed as screens of an indexical ilk, receiving the transitory impressions of shadows and dust.⁶⁶

But indexes of the specifically *corporeal* variety also continued to crop up from time to time in his work. A collage from 1951 entitled *Should Love Come First?*, for instance, features an inked footprint (presumably Rauschenberg’s), not unlike the hospital record of infant’s feet (Fig. 15).⁶⁷ (The work still exists, but it is no longer visible, since Rauschenberg later painted over it to produce one of his *Black Paintings*.)⁶⁸ In a rather stunning anticipation of Warhol’s *Dance Diagram*, the human footprint in the collage is positioned next to a series of shoeprint symbols connected by dotted lines: an instructional diagram for the performance of a waltz. Jackson Pollock is surely a target here, since his charged handprint is supplanted by the infantile bassesse of the foot, and his existential dance becomes a preordained routine, mechanically reproduced and distributed as a didactic formula of industrialized culture. This critical reworking of Pollock’s embodied heroics signals the fate of the corporeal index in a vast majority of Rauschenberg and Johns’ artistic practice: what was once pregnant with psychic charge will be drained of affect; desire will be present only in negated form, and the twinned

⁶⁶ John Cage, “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work,” in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 102.

⁶⁷ Rauschenberg’s son was born the month after this work was first exhibited at Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. Cf. Jonathan Katz, “‘Committing the Perfect Crime:’ Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Spring, 2008), pp. 38-39.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

freedoms of movement and self will be constrained within the determinations of external matrices.

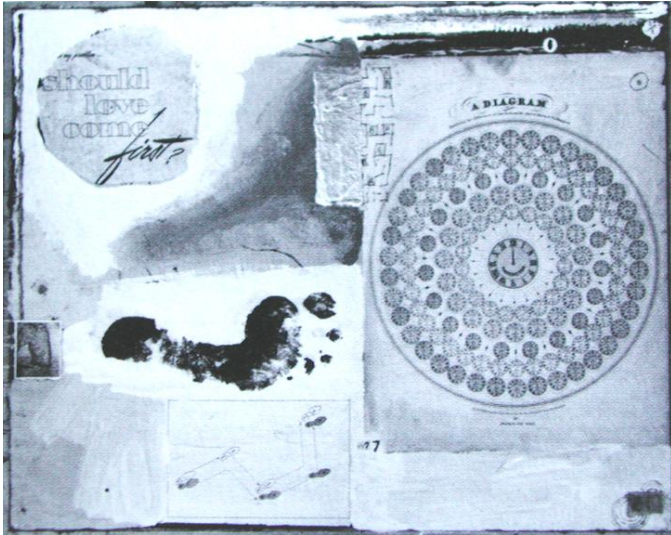


Figure 15. Robert Rauschenberg. *Should Love Come First?* 1951

By 1955, it was Rauschenberg's then-lover Jasper Johns who would take up the mantle of the corporeal index, reworking its dimensions in a fashion that was able to deal simultaneously with the conflicting legacies of both Duchamp and Pollock, the two titans of bodily indexicality from the late forties. Even more directly than Rauschenberg, although certainly based at least partially on his own indexical practice, Johns undertakes a form of corporeal indexicality that would seem at first to be almost precisely the same operation of body-casting as in Duchamp's *Erotic Objects*. Jasper Johns' seminal *Target with Plaster Casts* would appear in 1955 (Fig. 16). An encaustic-on-collage of red and yellow concentric circles set against a red ground (a wry reference to the modernist obsession with the primary colors from Rodchenko to Mondrian to Newman), the painting features a system of cubbies along its top border. Lift the little door to each

cubby, and a different plaster part-object will reveal itself: a red foot, a white face, an orange ear, a green penis and scrotum. One cubby, in pale blue, is empty.



Figure 16. Jasper Johns. *Target with Plaster Casts*. 1955

The indexical body comes under physical and chromatic fragmentation within the cubbies. Body parts are disarticulated from their mythic corporeal whole to be arranged serially in a geometrical architecture whose rationality is nonetheless undermined by the irrationality of the ordering of body-parts—including the empty cubby—and its chromatic definition, which proceeds

according to no apparent rules other than randomness and difference. In these latter aspects, the plaster casts differ enormously from the *Target with Four Faces*, also of 1955, in which the four casts of a single face appear nearly identical (a fragmented and quadrupled physiognomy) suggesting a desubjectivized sameness and a breakdown in the conditions of difference that structure selfhood, even and especially in the most subjectively charged fragment of the body, the face.

If the casts signify the term “sculpture” in the medium-melding between “painting” and “sculpture,” then these fragments transduce the classical ruin into a

geometricized lineup whose Eames-like colors and indexical process evacuate any classicizing impulse while simultaneously restoring “figuration” to American mid-century painting in the muted language of the cast.

Johns could have seen the *Female Fig Leaf* and *Dart-Object* as early as December 1953 or January 1954, during their first public exhibition in a Duchamp-Picabia show at the Rose Fried Gallery in New York. After all, it was almost immediately afterward that Johns would make *Untitled* (1954), his first work to incorporate body casts, using the face of Rachel Rosenthal, a fellow artist he had met at Merce Cunningham’s studio.⁶⁹ By the time of *No* (1961) and *Field Painting* (1963-64), Johns had not only acquired a bronze cast of *Female Fig Leaf*, but he even used this very object as a tool in the production of those very paintings. The stamped or traced outline of the Duchamp piece leaves its mark, quite literally, on the surface of those paintings, thus dramatizing in strikingly literal fashion the centrality of Duchamp’s indexical part-objects to Johns’ practice.

Among the cubbied casts of *Target With Plaster Casts*, however, the presence of the male genitals cannot be ignored. To insert an indexical cast of the body—especially of the genitals—into an art object in 1955 could not possibly have avoided the overwhelming legacy of post-surrealist libidinal investments that had defined the corporeal index during the preceding years, especially since its most obvious precedents

⁶⁹ Paul B. Franklin, “Between Art and Life, Art as Life: A Chronology of the Lives and Work of Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg,” in *Dancing Around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*, ed. Carlos Basualdo and Erica F. Battle (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2012), p. 314. Although I found no conclusive evidence that Johns actually saw the Duchamp-Picabia show, the fact that he began body-casting within weeks after the *Erotic Objects* were first shown is compelling circumstantial evidence. The encounter would also provide some explanation for Johns’ choice of a target in the painting. A target is, after all, a dart-object.

were to be found in the two artists most central to Johns' own practice. Therefore it is all the more remarkable how dead the index appears here, selected and displayed in a matter-of-fact way that hints only obliquely at the possibility for desire.

The discursive and aesthetic construct of the corporeal index that Johns inherited was invested with an intense yet subjectively *specific* libidinal ardor. Albeit in different ways, both Duchamp and Pollock had articulated the psychosexual dynamics of male heterosexual desire. Even as Duchamp disrupted gender binaries with his constant corporeal inversions, the imprint derives its frisson from the ins and outs of sexual difference, a gender binary that would not necessarily apply in a homoerotic context. Even as Pollock reduced the overtly erotic dimension of libidinal energies, there can be little doubt about the particular subject position at stake in his work.⁷⁰ Johns' body casts invoke the memory of the erotically charged indexes that preceded it, but only to summarily negate their psychic auratics at every level: they are purged of erotics, of desire, of the unconscious, and of existential individuality. Desire haunts these objects in negated form, the ostentatiously banished force that had once driven the corporeal index in all its aesthetic manifestations.

What these de-eroticized casts might signify is a certain misfit between subject position and the available codes for its own psychosexual articulation. The ferocity with which New York School painting had asserted the privilege of a narrow, particular subject-position in the guise of universal experience had produced an enormous range of silences, the specificities of which subsequent generations of practitioners worked to articulate. Gay men were perhaps only the most proximate of these vacancies. The fact

⁷⁰ Cf. Clark, "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," p. 229.

that women were largely excluded from avant-garde practice in the early fifties raises the question of what subjects were able to appear under these conditions.⁷¹ If the violent universalism of the New York School had produced the specific silence of gay male subjectivity, then that particular subject—whose defining desire was once called “the love that dare not speak its name”—experienced some difficulty in articulating itself in symbolic and, it seems, indexical form.

In fact, the blanket prohibition of the homosexual subject in the AbEx generation—that convulsive crisis of the heterosexist modern Man—was of such intensity that it immediately called for, and contributed to the production of, a generation that was entirely gay, as uniform in its homosexuality as Pollock's generation had been in its hetero masculinity. From John Cage to Merce Cunningham to Jasper Johns to Robert Rauschenberg to Cy Twombly to Ellsworth Kelly, these artists must be called the Gay Generation.⁷² It could not be more fitting that its entry into the avant-garde was heralded

⁷¹ The exceptions proving the rule here are of course Louise Bourgeois and Maya Deren, the crucial specificities of which are beyond the scope of the present essay. I certainly do not wish to claim that there were, in Linda Nochlin's famous words, “no great women artists” at this time, but their acknowledgment and registration within the art historical record still requires a certain excavation and even risks tokenism. It serves nothing to pretend that historical circumstances did after all permit the articulation of difference (of gender/race/class/sexuality), the very thing that cultural practice at this time worked so successfully to deny.

The Other in the form of the female subject was also called for, but the difficulty that artists experienced in answering that call bespeaks the radicality of female authorship under mid-century American conditions. Some answered that call by fulfilling every expectation of a heterosexist imaginary, as in Helen Frankenthaler's graceful washes of pale and watery color. Far more dangerous to the prevailing order was Carolee Schneeman's clitoris, exposed in performance, ensconced in installation, and framed in photographs in 1963. Schneeman has rightly been criticized for her essentialism of gender, but under these specific historical pressures, her genitals' anatomical specificity could launch a quite disruptive critique precisely by appearing within the context of a feminist essentialism. That is, Schneeman's performance of her embodied gender constituted its threat because it usurped the very transhistorical, essentializing, mythologizing shamanic space that the AbEx gents had considered their rightful stomping-ground.

⁷² The art historian Jonathan D. Katz has made it his life's work to analyze the role of homosexuality in twentieth century American art. His work on the gay generation of Johns,

by a man who loved “Silence.” The symbolic apparatus that this generation had inherited was built on an armature of heteronormative male desire at every level (authorship, technique, spectatorship), and it was therefore semiotically impossible, not to mention politically prohibited, to articulate specific dimensions of gay male subjectivity. One couldn’t say it out loud, in other words, even if it’s all anyone was talking about.⁷³

This particular historical contradiction reveals the radicality—unthinkable today—of the homosexual authorial subject at precisely this period, at the very moment when its mumming emergence took the form of scientific medicalization (Kinsey) and coercive and violent suppression (the Lavender Scare, state censorship, police crackdowns). It should be said from the start that this kind of analysis need not revive biographical or individualist readings of works of art—those dusty old humanist mythologies that purport to reveal an author behind every work—since the specificities of a historically constructed and socially positioned subject bely the transcendent Subject of humanist ideologies. That said, the startling uniformity of sexual orientation in this generation of American artists demands attention. Long before the identity politics of the late sixties, it is this generation of gay artists in the early fifties whose production begs the question: at what point does subject-position become an indispensable criterion for the

Rauschenberg, and Cage is indispensable, if occasionally humanistic in its theoretical orientation. See, for example, “Dismembership: Jasper Johns and the Body Politic” in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, eds. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (New York: Routledge Press, 1999) and “John Cage’s Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1999), pp. 231-252.

⁷³ Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948) is a film-length exercise of this kind of silence. In an interview, screenplay writer Arthur Laurents recalled, “What was curious to me was that *Rope* was obviously about homosexuals. The word was never mentioned. Not by Hitch, not by anyone at Warners where it was filmed. It was referred to as ‘it.’ They were going to do a picture about ‘it’ and the actors were ‘it.’” See the documentary short film *Rope Unleashed!*, dir. Laurent Bouzereau, Universal Pictures, 2003. Online video posted by “giggioilgrigio,” Aug 9, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXS4jgOZqvU>

reading of a work of art? I argue that it is precisely here, in the wake of a generation that re-asserted a regressive model of patriarchal authorial subjectivity whose claim to universal validity was staked, paradoxically enough, on the specific libidinal dynamics of a post-surrealist heterosexual self, that the marginalized subject-position of the author becomes a defining matrix for the production of the work of art, and therefore also necessary for our historical accounts of it.

Beyond subject position, however, Johns and Rauschenberg's negation of desire in both corporeal index and painterly inscription is complex and overdetermined. At the waning edge of Abstract Expressionism, it was clear to both artists that claims of painterly expressivity, especially within the heroicizing masculinism of athletic gesturality, could no longer proceed as if from a primordial space immune to historical determination. In the wake of AbEx's immediate absorption by culture industry (Vogue), academicism (Louis, Frankenthaler, et al), and even the US government (CIA propaganda), forces of collectivity in multiple forms had begun to encroach on aesthetic practice and its claims to individual freedoms. The painterly mark, in referring back to the process and the body that made it, would no longer signify authorial selfhood, but rather the inseparability of that authorship from the multiplicity of determinative arrangements that undermine individual (aesthetic) autonomy. If painting was to continue to be a conduit for the unconscious, for instance, what it would render visible is a psychic space whose semiotic structure it itself an object of social relations. Hence Johns' claim that the idea to paint the flag came to him in a dream. Like the Lacanian unconscious, famously "structured like a language," this artist dreams in the templates of collectivity. Emerging from the unconscious, desire thus not only requires a language to

articulate itself, but is itself always-already articulated in received semiotic and conceptual arrangements, like a language.

Carceral Trio: Klein, Warhol, Manzoni

This, then, was the model of corporeal indexicality that Manzoni inherited. Derived from Duchamp and Pollock the aesthetic trace of the body had been rerouted through Johns and Rauschenberg, who stripped it of all psychic charge, drained it of desire, leaving a deadened form of the index, a neutralized negation of the its own post-surrealist precedents. It is this lineage of bodily imprints that made it possible for Manzoni to mark his selfhood with a fingerprint. After all, the very first image that Manzoni chose to print in his short-lived journal *Azimuth* was a full-page spread of Jasper Johns' *Target With Plaster Casts*. Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1955-59) followed just a few pages later.

Manzoni was not the only heir to this tradition, and his response was not the only one possible. Corporeal indexicality also became major concerns for both Yves Klein and Andy Warhol. Klein's *Anthropometries of the Blue Period*, for example, feature graceful imprints of floating, usually headless, women's bodies beginning in 1959. Andy Warhol's *13 Most Wanted Men* of a few years later appropriated mug shots of criminals, a photographically indexical system of identification that historically (then as now) linked an image to its bodily referent. Although their projects might initially seem completely incompatible, I will argue that these works by these three artists, insofar as

they involve the indexical registry of the body, are linked by the terms with which they chose to respond to the legacy of postwar corporeal indexicality, and by the profound limits within which the imprint and the body had come to be historically situated.

As demonstrated in a previous section, the three principal 19th century technologies of criminal identification were dactyloscopic analysis, anthropometric measurement, and the photographic mugshot. Remarkably, these three major neo-avantgarde artists each took up these same techniques within a few years of one another: Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* (1959-62), Andy Warhol's *13 Most Wanted Men* (1964), and Manzoni's *Impronte* (1960-61) and *Uova* series (1960).



Figure 17. Yves Klein. *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* (ANT 82). 1960

The numerous Klein works that go under the title *Anthropometry* were produced between 1959 and the artist's death in 1962. These are figurative paintings in which the body of the model is slathered physically in paint, usually blue, and then impressed onto the canvas (Fig. 17). The models were invariably female, and smeared blue from the breasts to the knees, the result is an imprint of the body that suggests the sinuous

hourglass of the traditional nude. With bodies pressed up against the painting, Klein could also make negative indexes of the models by spraying around them with blue paint, thus leaving their ghostly silhouette.

Like a postwar, painterly Bertillon, Klein names these *Anthropometries*, and yet the operations could not be further from the police clerk's astringent positivism. Just as the headless torsos evoke the ideal beauty of ruined classical figures, so too do the sprayed silhouettes resemble literal auras (recalling Rauschenberg and Weil's blueprint figures), thus casting the return of painterly figuration in floridly metaphysical terms. Doubling down on aura in an era of its manifest evaporation, Klein claimed to have impregnated the canvases with his own spiritual sensibility.

The bodily indexes of the *Anthropometries* are deprived of the indentifying function that often attends the body-trace. These headless torsos or flying silhouettes direct us not to the personhood of the referents, multiple and anonymous, but rather to the authority of the artist, singular and monadic. The anthropometric imprint is rescued from the politics of identity (with which it is historically wedded) through a mystification of the author-function and a reinvestment with transcendent individualism of techniques which traditionally questioned it.

It is as if Klein were attempting to revise the historical record, recoding "anthropometry" as an idealizing, spiritual enterprise, rather than the violent discursive inscription and rationalist control of the body that is its true historical legacy. Klein recognized that visual art, in its mythically romantic dimension as unalienated labor, in its capacity to pluck an image out of its historical situation and project it across a transcendent aestheticism, was uniquely situated to achieve just this sort of revisionism.

Klein and his auratic anthropometry were no stranger to historical aestheticization. The artist had heard that when the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945, the heat of the explosion was so intense that some bodies near the epicenter were instantly vaporized. All that was left were their outlines, in ash, burned against adjacent walls. Klein instantly recognized a similarity to his own painting technique, and in 1961, he produced *Hiroshima* (Fig. 18). This anthropometry painting shows spectral figures, bathed in blue, with arms outstretched as though thrown back by the force of the blast, or even posed as though futilely running away. It is a poetic meditation on the beauty of human beings instantaneously incinerated by other human beings. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed by the US atomic bombing of Japan. It is one of the largest single mass-murder events in the history of humankind. To make a beautiful picture out of a horror of this magnitude, even if in a misguided attempt at memorial, is, at best, the apotheosis of bad taste. This painting embodies all that can go wrong when twentieth-century art encountered historical trauma, and thus Klein's injection of aura into the criminological procedures of anthropometry comes as no surprise.

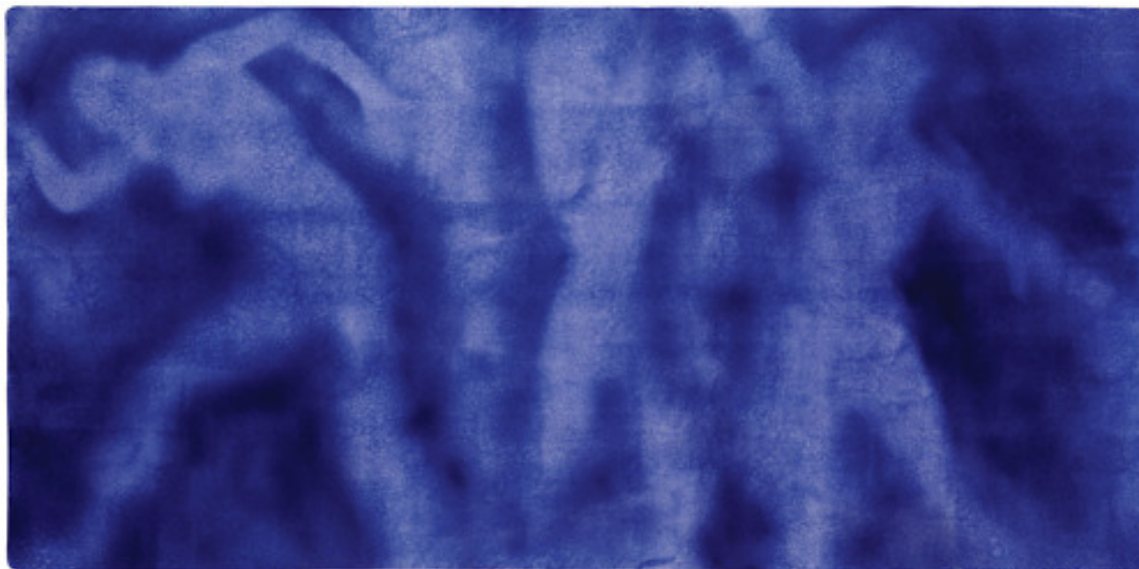


Figure 18. Yves Klein. *Hiroshima*. 1961

Strange as it may sound, Klein was not alone in this project. At the very same moment, Salvador Dalí, by this point having completed his transition from prewar surrealist provocateur to postwar cryptofascist media clown, invoked the tropes of Bertillonage in an aesthetic effort to obliterate their historical memory. In 1960, Dalí's painting *The Sistine Madonna* (1958) appeared at the New York exhibition *Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanter's Domain* at the D'Arcy Galleries (Fig. 19).⁷⁴ The large painting overlays three images in hallucinatory illusionism: a giant ear in Benday dots, a pinkish reflection of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, and a trompe-l'oeil element of folded white papers and dangling string at upper-left. Apparently, the work was somehow part

⁷⁴ Duchamp had been given carte-blanche to organize the exhibition, and it was his choice to place the Dalí next to his own work, the installation *Coin Sale* (1960), which included live (and defecating) chickens in a glass-doored phone booth. The title of the piece was spelled out in coins, linking the work obliquely to exchange value and the money commodity, but its double-entendre is revealed in French *coin sale*, or "dirty corner." The stench of chicken excrement made good on the double meaning. *Coin* also means "wedge," as in *Wedge of Chastity* (Fr. *Coin de chasteté*) of 1954, also shown at the exhibition.

of Dalí's farcical attempt to reconcile Catholicism not only with science at large but with nuclear physics in particular, in a half-baked scheme he called "Nuclear Mysticism."⁷⁵

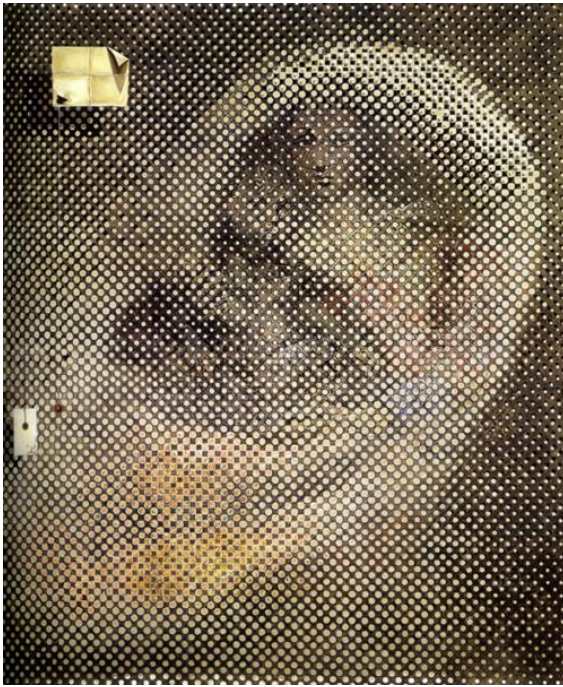


Figure 19. Salvador Dalí. *The Sistine Madonna*. 1958



Figure 20. Salvador Dalí. *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*. 1933

Dalí's dream coincides quite well with Klein's catholic mysticism and atomic enthusiasm, but it is the giant ear in the painting that is relevant here. Although this particular ear was lifted from an image of Pope John XXIII from *Paris Match*, the framed and frontal ear harkens back to a photomontage that Dalí had executed in 1933 entitled *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy* (Fig. 20). This earlier work juxtaposes images of swooning women (and one man) with an irregular grid of photographed ears, the latter of which

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Étant donnés*, p. 104.

were culled from Bertillon's photographic records of criminals.⁷⁶ As noted above, the shape of the ear was an object of obsession for Bertillon, who sought in its folds a marker of bodily individuality that fingerprinting would eventually disclose. In 1958, Dalí swathes the anthropometric origins of ear imagery in religious albs, but in 1933 the positivist body of criminology could still offer the surrealist crackle of the miraculous. Hadn't other surrealists, Breton and Ernst especially, sought the unconscious in 19th century scientific periodicals like *La Nature*?⁷⁷ The documentary index of the photograph, with all its positivist remove and scientific authority, was precisely the doorway to repressed desire, and Dalí's photcollage alludes to the eros disguised within the disinterested gaze. That this series of fleshy orifices belonged to criminals, the fêted transgressors of the surrealist imagination, only heightened the appeal for a group of artists who (in the thirties) wanted to shatter the law in all its incarnations.

Desire and police photography were also centrally at stake for Andy Warhol when he took up his own set of corporeal indexes. If Klein looked to anthropometry, Warhol looked to the mugshot. For *13 Most Wanted Men*, his mural at the 1964 World's Fair in New York, he appropriated mugshots from an internal booklet of the New York Police Department entitled the "Thirteen Most Wanted Men." Warhol had acquired the booklet, which was not available to the public, through his friend and fellow homosexual Wynn

⁷⁶ Ian Walker, *City Gorged With Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 28.

⁷⁷ For more on *La Nature* and its reception among the Surrealists, see Chapter Five of Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*.

Chamberlain, an artist whose boyfriend was a cop.⁷⁸ Warhol silkscreened the photographs onto large Masonite panels, which he then assembled into a giant grid (Fig. 21; detail Fig. 22). Richard Meyer has written the definitive account of the project, in which he interprets the mural as an exploration of queer desire, itself a criminal act at the time. Mugshots necessarily include both a head-on and profile shot, and so when arranged in a grid as they were in the mural, some of the male faces appear to gaze suggestively at one another. Meyer writes, “In choreographing such moments of visual reciprocity between the outlaws, Warhol stages the act of men look at one another as a



Figure 21. Andy Warhol. 13 Most Wanted Men. 1964

monumental scene of criminality.”⁷⁹ In a play on the word “wanted” in the title, Warhol associates gay desire with the state apparatus that violently punishes it, while simultaneously transforming the outer wall of the New York State Pavilion into an image of a gay cruising spot. Later that year Warhol would make the homoerotic connection explicit with his film *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys* (1964). The piece obviously

caused a scandal, and Warhol was forced to cover

it over with aluminum paint, making the reflective monochrome surface signify the censorship to which the piece was subjected.

⁷⁸ Richard Meyer, “Most Wanted Men: Homoeroticism and the Secret of Censorship in Early Warhol,” in *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 143.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

But if Warhol had inherited practices of corporeal indexicality from Johns and Rauschenberg, who had negated desire in the bodily imprint, it is notable that the eroticism that re-erupts in Warhol's practice is explicitly a homoerotic one: gay eros entwined with positivist techniques of bodily identity.⁸⁰ Conversely, when Warhol silkscreens the objects of the heterosexist male gaze, like Marilyn Monroe, the image is drained of any erotic promise, refracted as it is through circuits of technical reproducibility and mass cultural expropriation, the regime of images we have come to call the spectacle (this had not been the case for De Kooning ten years earlier, whose auratic *Marilyn Monroe* is lush with desire and painterly *promesse de bonheur*).



Figure 22. Andy Warhol. 13 Most Wanted Men (detail). 1964

Warhol would later adopt more direct means of linking corporeal indexicality to homoeroticism, in his *Oxidation Paintings* of the late seventies and even more explicitly

⁸⁰ Within the context of Warhol's wider practice, his appropriation of the mugshot sets police photography in a continuum of modern photographic likenesses that includes the vaunted images of film stars and first ladies. This is much the same approach that Sekula takes in "The Body and the Archive," which is motivated by the desire to historicize a greater range of 19th century photography: not only Nadar's portraits of the bourgeoisie, but also Bertillon's portraits of criminals. Both Warhol and Sekula suggest that publicity shots of celebrities and mugshots of petty thieves are equally part of photographic image culture. They each constitute their subjects within the social relations of the time, if at different, even mutually opposed positions within those relations. Both these forms of indexical likenesses, in their historical elaboration, contribute to our understanding of the role of the photograph. Therefore, as nodes in a common network, they constitute one another.

with his *Cum Paintings* (c.1978).⁸¹ The former were executed when Warhol and friends urinated onto canvases covered in copper paint (the urine oxidizes the copper, thereby turning its color in washes of chromatic drippings); the latter were executed when Warhol—or more likely his companions—ejaculated onto canvases primed with gesso. Both of these works reflect on the twinned legacies of Pollock and Duchamp in this realm of the bodily trace. They constitute a hilarious critique of Pollockian performativity—to borrow Amelia Jone’s phrase—the spurts and dribbles of paint that stood in for bodily fluids in the heroic masculinity of the Abstract Expressionist generation.⁸² In addition, both works—the *Cum Paintings* in particular—are indebted to Duchamp’s one-offs from 1946, the *Paysage Fautif* and the untitled body hair collage.

For Klein it is anthropometry. For Warhol, the mugshot. Rounding out the troika of criminological indexicality are the corporeal traces at hand (and the works to which I will devote the most sustained attention): Manzoni’s fingerprints.

⁸¹ For an incisive account of the Oxidation Paintings as a response to Pollock, see Rosalind Krauss, “Horizontalities,” in Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 102.

⁸² Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).



Figure 23. Remo Bianco. Untitled. 1956

Having come of age in '50's Milan, Manzoni would have been exposed to indexicality in multiple forms, not only from the transatlantics Johns and Rauschenberg, but also from local artists as well. Several artist on the Milanese scene, including Toti Scialoja and Remo Bianco, specialized in what were then called "imprints." In 1956,

Bianco had written the "Manifesto dell'arte improntale" (The Manifesto of Imprint Art), which declared, "The art of the future will come under the sign of the IMPRINT." From the late '40's Bianco had been making images by dipping objects into paint and stamping their trace onto the surface of the painting, and by the mid-fifties, his impressions took the forms of casts or reliefs in an innovative array of materials like rubber (Fig. 23).

Often achromatic, these tabular arrangements of toys and knickknacks recall the operations of the early Pop artists of the Independent Group in London, or later, Claes Oldenburg's careful compositions of right-angled objects for *Ray Gun Wing* (1977). As an older member of the Nuclear Group whose practice centered around whitish indexes, Bianco clearly had a deep impact on Manzoni's practice.

In fact, after early experiments with academic figuration and landscape in the early '50's, Manzoni's very first paintings in 1956 were composed entirely of indexical traces. Usually of small metallic household items like safety pins or scissors, the imprints in these paintings are patterned in all-over compositions in the somber brownish palette of

informel art. They are usually executed in tar against oil. Sometimes Manzoni capitalizes on the zoomorphic allusiveness of the objects—particularly pliers and shears—to suggest bosky beasts or undersea creatures. He would temporarily abandon the index when he made his great transition from Nuclear artist to the Manzoni of the Achromes late in 1957, but the *impronta* would return in 1960, this time as the mark of his own body.

The most famous of Manzoni's fingerprint works are undoubtedly the *Uova*, the hard-boiled eggs marked with his thumbprint, first executed in Copenhagen for an exhibition at Addi K pke Gallery in June of 1960. On two later occasions, he publicly cooked, stamped, and invited an audience to devour eggs: the first time as the last event to be held at his short-lived Milan gallery Azimuth on July 21, 1960, and the second as a staged spectacle in the studios of a newsreel Filmgiornale S.E.D.I. later the same month (Fig. 24, 25).⁸³ These spectacles were called, alternately, “*Nutrimenti dell’arte: Consumazione Dinamica*” and “*Consumazione dell’arte Dinamica del Pubblico, Divorare l’Arte*.”⁸⁴ The titles suggest a public display of consumption that is nutritionally-oriented yet predicated on the indecorous prospect of *devouring*, an unseemly show of bodies sating their hunger.⁸⁵

⁸³ Battino and Palazzoli, p. 104; S.E.D.I. stands for “Società Editrice Documentari Italiani.” See Francesca Pola, *Manzoni: Azimut* (London: Gagosian Gallery, 2012), p. 50.

⁸⁴ Anna Constantini, “Piero Manzoni in Context,” in Celant 1998, p. 270; see also Celant 2009, p. 193.

⁸⁵ A few eggs were saved from gobbling mouths and preserved for posterity; most of these are cushioned in cotton packing within plywood boxes, but one is displayed erect in a transparent plastic case, and one other in a velvet-lined silver box.



Figure 24. Piero Manzoni marking eggs with his thumbprint. 1960

On the *Uova*, the elliptical shape left by the charming roundness of Manzoni's digit mimes the morphology of its ovoid ground, while simultaneously referring, both indexically and metonymically, to the body that produced it. The eggs themselves are organic bodies, produced and determined by a biology which is nonetheless subsumed into the logic of exchange. These instruments of avian reproduction have already been expropriated from a field of "natural" or biological processes into the economic operations of the market; more precisely, the embryological processes that occasioned their existence have themselves been absorbed and determined by market demands. Eggs are laid for sale on *the* market, and *a* market is where we buy them. Produced to be consumed both economically and gastronomically, the eggs are then stamped by Manzoni with the mark of his own corporeal individuality, the biological imprint that marks *his* body as uniquely identifiable and thus available to larger systems of surveillance and control. Manzoni's touch pushes the eggs into a specific subset of commodity relations, the art market, in a spectacle of artistic promotion and gustatory consumption whose

emblem is that of biometric analysis. Like the yolk in the series of concentric globes that comprise their interiors, the eggs are situated at the center of increasing spheres of reinscription: biology recoded as economy recoded as artwork by a body which itself is coded into relations of power.

The eggs bear no other mark other than the thumbprint, and thus the finger functions as a substitution for the signature. In his 1936 article “Fingerprint Signatures (A Word of Caution Concerning Their Use),” fingerprint expert George Tyler Mairs warns that rather than safeguard against fraud, the substitution of fingerprints for a written signature on legal documents occasions multiple opportunities for counterfeit, since the prints can be taken from bodies that are comatose or even dead. He distinguishes ordinary writing or mark-making from a legal signature through the terms “intent” and “assent.” “Intent and assent require conscious life;” he explains, “they also require mental capacity to choose between assenting and dissenting, to sign or not to sign... But not so with a fingerprint... In death or unconsciousness they are the same as in conscious life and their usual function is that of establishing bodily identity.”⁸⁶ Legally, for Mairs, the fingerprint signifies only the physical body that produced it; it is a mark devoid of intentionality, no proof of motivated thought. Manzoni’s substitution of the print for the signature is an infantilizing move, the artist registering his selfhood with the same process as literal infants on their birth certificates, or corpses on post-mortem documents. It erases the vaunted creativity behind the artistic autograph, replacing it with the mindless stamp of corporeality.

⁸⁶ George Tyler Mairs, “Fingerprint Signatures (A Word of Caution Concerning Their Use),” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Vol. 27, No. 3. (Sept.-Oct., 1936), pp. 409-411.

With the *Uova*, Manzoni shifts the principal mode of receivership from visuality to ingestion. Johns' cubbyholes had also invited peek-a-boo participation which, though based on manual manipulation, ultimately privileged the visual. Other experiments underway in collectives like Fluxus, GRAV, and the Situationist International also emphasized audience participation, often to unleash ludic play in the hopes of escaping the determining conditions of capital. Manzoni's model of participation could not be more strongly opposed to these, however. His participatory dynamic is as infantilizing as the consumer culture it mimics, while inscribing the body in a multisensory ritual of administered nutrition. The egg spectacle recruits the tactile (in the handling and peeling of the egg), the olfactory (egg smell), the visual (graphic mark on white ground), and the auditory (crackling of shells) in a decidedly synaesthetic experience. All sensations, however, proceed in service of the gustatory, whose requirements structure the goal-oriented operations that activate the other senses. Emphasizing eating as the principal mode of interaction between audience and work, Manzoni writes, "The public was able to make contact with these works by swallowing the entire exhibition in 70 minutes."⁸⁷ It is as though the headquarters of aesthetic delectation have moved from the eye to the mouth, or out of the head entirely to the stomach and regions yet further south. The eye-mind axis, allegedly founded on the vertical axis of the biped but which nonetheless moves through the body in a horizontal vector, pitches vertiginously toward the appetitive chute of orality-anality.⁸⁸ How curious that an artist credited with leading the way toward increased conceptualization should chart his path through the stomach.

⁸⁷ Manzoni, "Some Realizations, Some Experiments, Some Projects," in Celant 1998, p. 221-222.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of verticality in the Modernist paradigm—and its discontents: Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 25, 89-124.



Figure 25. Piero Manzoni. Uovo con impronta. 1960

This is hardly mere debasement, however. Manzoni's trick is to prove that the mythic artist, with the merest touch of a finger, can transform an object as banal as an egg into a special and putatively valuable work of art. The joke then doubles back on itself, because as Manzoni invites his hungry audience to devour and digest the elevated egg, the cultural product is converted—through biological processes—into shit.⁸⁹ We can even imagine the cycle continuing further, when later Manzoni repackages his waste as a luxury commodity to be traded for the price of gold.

The marking of groups of objects or bodies by a single identifying mark of ownership recalls the operations of branding—both of livestock and slaves—as biological units recognizable as property of a particular owner, and of commodities as objects recognizable as for sale by a particular corporation. In fact, in “Criminal Identification,” J. Edgar Hoover names the branding of slaves and criminals, along with tattooing and

⁸⁹ This conversion process appears frequently in the Manzoni literature. Cf. Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art after Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 43.

eventually photography, as antecedents to the technologies of dactyloscopy.⁹⁰ Two poles of the eggs pieces can be identified as, first, the branding of objects in the spectacle of commodity exchange, and second, the biopolitics of identity operant through the biometrical analysis of the conditions of corporeality. The eggs thus deftly unite commercial spectacle and the knowledge-power nexus: marketing and criminal science as a joint package.

Warhol and Manzoni together evacuate both the directness and the liberatory potential for corporeal indexicality. After Pollock and Duchamp, Johns and Rauschenberg had denuded the index of its masculinist libidinal charge, purging the bodily imprint of all post-surrealist traces (and their concomitant promises of self-knowledge and liberation). Drawing on both Johns and Rauschenberg before them, Manzoni and Warhol could figure the index only through the power-knowledge nexus that constructs the corporeal subject in networks of surveillance and control. If heterosexist erotics were negated in the practice of the gay generation, artists of the early sixties inherited a deadened indexicality that could not be imagined apart from an administered aesthetic and its aesthetic of administration.

Eroticism returns, in altered form, with Warhol. As the last, and gayest, of the gay generation, Warhol's indexicality in the early sixties could revel in its flamboyant homoeroticism, which could nonetheless only be articulated within the surveilling eye of the state or the spectacularizing eye of culture industry. State power and commercial propaganda are understandably entwined in Warhol's practice, since, after all, in a capitalist political economy (especially at the height of the Cold War) they usually

⁹⁰ J. Edgar Hoover, "Criminal Identification," *The American Journal of Police Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb., 1931), pp. 8-19.

amounted to one and the same thing. Even as Warhol reintroduced transgressive eroticism, it is always-already caught in the nets of state and spectacular power.

Manzoni eliminates the last vestiges of eros from the mark of the body, conceiving of the index solely as biometrical data, to be assessed like any other sign by the tabular discipline of an administrative order. Klein, by marked contrast, clings deliriously to the totally bankrupt claims of utopian promise that had sometimes attended prewar avant-garde formations, at a time before their real-world viability had been completely dismantled with the collapse of European humanism in WWII.

The severely delusional quality of Klein's utopianism, its orgiastic derision of materiality, its undialectical and dilletantish appropriation of Eastern mythologies, the way it routinely trafficked in the most risibly traditional forms of authority, all point to a certain historical threshold: such desperate contradictions signal that his attempts occurred precisely at the moment when it had become impossible for the avant-garde to perform one of its principal functions (the figuration of a better reality) without submitting to the forms of modernity's cultural administration (spectacle and culture industry) that utopian practices had sought to escape.

At the very moment when other practitioners were turning their attention to an aesthetics of administration, Klein instrumentalized painting, an apparatus that had once promised escape from worldly oppression, to prise a material practice of body-knowledge, namely anthropometry, away from its historical roots as a positivist technique of state control, inscribing it instead in the transhistorical glamour of classical beauty and all its attendant idealizations. At the same time, he projected a mythologizing

plenitude onto an aesthetic form, the corporeal index, at the very moment when that model of indexicality had been thoroughly discredited.

All this begs the question, however, why criminals? Why the carceral in the aesthetic? How do we account for the fetishization of the criminal that had often preoccupied artists during the modern period, and which, in the age of Saint Genet, showed no signs of abating?⁹¹

Foucault offers one explanation.⁹² In his essay “What is an Author?” he posits criminality at the heart of the modern author-function. Individual authorship is born, he argues, at the moment in which writers became subjects of punishment. Historically speaking, the act of penning a heretical or seditious text suddenly made the identity of the writer a notion of great interest and urgency. In works of art as in works of discourse, the figure of the individual author begins to take shape when issues of attribution and imprisonment are at stake. At the same time, however, the initiation of copyrights and intellectual property law interpellate the artist as an owner within the social relations of private property (a point to which I will return in Chapter 4). The artist’s vaunted individuality, his storied autonomy, his freedom, is ransomed by his domestication as a property-holder. In order to retain his edge, Foucault suggests, the artist harkens to the transgressive vocation that called him into existence in the first place, forever (and increasingly) performing the violation of laws, conventions, and codes as recompense for his privilege.

⁹¹ Jean Genet, the gay playwright and erstwhile petty criminal famous for *The Thief’s Journal* was canonized by Jean-Paul Sartre in his 1952 book *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963).

⁹² Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Language, Countermemory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

This is a curious paradox. The law, which bestows rights of ownership upon the artist, becomes the very thing that calls forth lawbreaking as the principal task of the artist. The artist rubs shoulders with the thief, and yet their positions within property relations could not be more opposed. The artist is positioned as the legitimate property-holder, whereas the thief is imagined as the illicit appropriator, the violator of private property.

Criminal activity, that is, the breaking of laws, provided an analogic figure for the aesthetic transgressions that characterized “modernism” and the progressivist assault invoked by the term “avant-garde” in all its formulations, particularly in the defiant Oedipality expected of successive generations of avant-garde practitioners. To work outside the confines of the law is the aspirational hope of aesthetic practice: to inhabit the role of outlaw in order to rescue us all, Robin Hood-style, from whatever social or conceptual strictures we may suffer. The artist and his practice must be cleaved off from the rationalist rigor that legislates everyday labor. In order to compensate for alienation, reification, and other modern forms of exploitation, he must be imagined not only as outside the law, but as transformative of its interior as well.

The link of criminality with forms of bodily individuation is not casual either. As Homi Bhabha explains, “From Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* we have learned that the most individuated are those subjects who are placed on the margins of society.”⁹³ Since both criminality and art are structured around the discursive production of the individual (the criminal or the artist), these figures, in their individuality, are allegedly situated at the margins of the social. The criminal is marginal by virtue of her defiance of law and the threat she poses to the national order. The artist is marginal by virtue of her

⁹³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 151.

unconventionality, her genius, her position ‘outside’ which enables a synoptic view of the social. We speak of “transgression” in both cases. Both criminal and artistic discourses are characterized by the notion of exceptionality: art is the only space reserved for allegedly unalienated labor, the redemptive transcendence—denied in everyday life—for which the work of art supposedly compensates. The criminal is the exception to human rights, the allegedly universal dignities attendant upon the citizen, which must be vigorously and legally defended, except of course when they must be vigorously and legally stripped, as when then citizen becomes the criminal.

A crucial difference, of course, is that the criminal is relegated to the margins of society by means of the discipline of his body in penal institutions, which interpellates him as a criminal, whereas the artist’s marginality is a mask for his actual privileges within modern relations of production. The myth of the criminal is that the penal institution restores him to society, while secretly reinforcing and exacerbating his marginality. The myth of the artist is that he was ever marginal to begin with. For Manzoni, the point is that no-body, artistic or otherwise, can escape the enforcements of power-knowledge and biopolitical determination.

Alias Welch: \$2,000 Reward

It may be that Duchamp foresaw all of this, since his prewar practice had already anticipated precisely the forms of biopolitical—or at least carceral—indexicality that we find in Manzoni and Warhol.

In 1923, for example, he pasted his own mugshot onto a spoof wanted poster that he had picked up in a New York restaurant, a readymade in the form of a cheap tourist

novelty (Fig. 26). If identity is at stake here, it should be noted immediately that the self was never whole for Duchamp. In his work, aborted processes of identity and identification invariably take place under conditions of splitting and fragmentation. Whether Rose or Marcel, MAR split from CEL, Tu or m', the linguistic signifiers of the self and the putative unity of their signified are constantly shattered and multiplied. But such appellation proliferation is perhaps most explicit and comical in the caption of the wanted poster: "\$2,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of George W. Welch, alias Bull, alias Pickens, etcetry etcetry." The use of an alias conveys a certain failure of the linguistic sign to specify its referent. In other words, words fail. Their condition as unmotivated makes them contingent and thus vulnerable.

A word, even the special kind of "token without a type"⁹⁴ called the proper name, is a kind of contract. It obligates a sign to signify a certain meaning according to a set of laws or conventions. It is for this reason that words belong to the Symbolic order, in which signs makes their references not by means of resemblance or contiguity, but by shared convention alone. Peirce calls direct attention to the contractual nature of symbols:

Now, we do find symbol...early and often to mean a convention or contract. Aristotle calls a noun a 'symbol,' that is, a conventional sign. In Greek, watchfire is a 'symbol,' that is, a signal agreed upon...a church creed is called a 'symbol' because it serves as a badge or shibboleth; a theatre ticket is called a 'symbol'; any ticket or check entitling one to receive anything is a 'symbol.'⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 26.

⁹⁵ C.S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," pp. 113-114.

A word can only signify something when we all agree upon it together, and this mutual agreement knits us together in a community of communicators. Our mutual agreement is a contract, and thus involves both trust and obligation. To violate the terms of the



Figure 26. Marcel Duchamp. \$2,000 Reward. 1923

contract is to break a trust, to betray a confidence. It is appropriate, then, that the confidence-man on the wanted poster, the operator of a Bucket Shop called “Hooke, Lyon, and Cinquer,” goes occasionally by the surname Welch. To *welch* is to renege on a bet, to violate the contract of a wager. In the pseudonymous splitting and multiplication of the name, Duchamp calls the reliability of the symbolic contract into question.

But the wanted poster, like its comrades posted in police stations and post offices, suggests, perhaps, a more reliable source of identification: the photographic index. Between “WANTED” and “\$2,000 REWARD” are pasted two photographic images, which together comprise the mug-shot. At last, it would seem—as it seemed at first to enthusiastic police-clerks of the 19th century—we have a sign of the most verifiable kind with which to collate perfidious aliases into a single, stable, identity. But even here the self splits: not one face, but two peer out from the page. One view is not enough; a

supplement, in profile, is required. For all its promise, the photographic trace harbors its own treacheries. The manhunt for a single self, which led through multiple fake names, can in the end only be reduced unsatisfyingly to a double-image. For Duchamp, the self is two-faced to the last.

The ultimate object of the manhunt is the unitary body, of course, whose anatomical signs and their traces would eventually betray the betrayer to his captors. Three years later, Duchamp would sign his *Anemic Cinema* with his fingerprint. As in the social science of criminology, the Duchampian self transitions from the slippery symbol, through the photographic index, to the bodily trace. Words and names play games for Duchamp; it is here in the symbolic realm that the self is most multiple. The photographic self in Duchamp's work also proliferates: glamour shots as Rose, mugshots as a criminal, and of course the grand "photographic" work of the Large Glass, its two panes marked respectively MAR and CEL.⁹⁶ Unlike criminology, however, in which the traces of the body can lead it to prison, when Duchamp arrives at the bodily index, identity becomes more elusive than ever, as the cryptic Erotic Objects made so clear. The form of the sign that was supposed to bring us closest to the body, to arrest, to eros, to satisfaction, leads us only to an infinite series of deferrals.

Trail of Fingerprints

This chapter circles around Manzoni's use of the fingerprint, a technique that recurs with some frequency in postwar art in both America and Europe. Rauschenberg had the foresight to include an FBI wanted poster in *Hymnal* already in 1955, but the

⁹⁶ For a reading of Duchamp's *Large Glass* as a photograph, see Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 1," pp. 203-206.

terms of this administrative (and ultimately biopolitical) indexicality are submerged in a sea of disparate signs ranging from the painterly to the photographic—the feisty hybridity on which Rauschenberg’s work insists. Jasper Johns signed *Ale Cans* more quietly with his own thumbprint in 1960. In 1965 the American Fluxus artist Robert Watts embedded his fingerprint in plaster within a small plastic case, the cover of which featured an

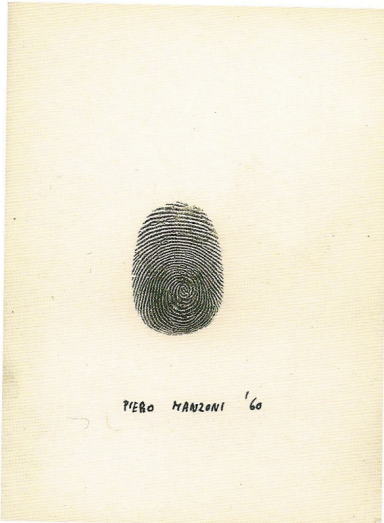


Figure 27. Piero Manzoni. *Impronta*. 1960

the artist reproduced the fingerprints in asphalt at a former industrial waste site outside Buffalo, New York.⁹⁷ In the late 60’s, Douglas Huebler would combine all three techniques (fingerprinting, anthropometry, and the mugshot), reconstituted at their site of origin through the appropriation of a wanted poster for the bank robber Edmund Kite McIntyre.⁹⁸

Hardly confined to eggshells, fingerprints begin proliferating wildly in Manzoni’s work in 1960. Although they are most closely associated with the *Uova* (and emerge concurrently), Manzoni produced many fingerprint works which are rarely discussed in

⁹⁷ Krauss, “Notes on the Index,” p. 208.

⁹⁸ The piece appeared in Lucy Lippard’s 1969 exhibition ‘557,087’ in Seattle, and in the recent exhibition “Six Years: Lucy Lippard and the Dematerialization of Art” at PS1.

the art historical literature. There are, for instance, the *Impronte*, over a dozen works on paper comprised solely of signature, date, and the artist's right thumbprint (Fig. 27). The print is centered on a small piece of white cardstock, not unlike a little calling-card. Their serial multiplicity may inspire comparison of one print to another, but side-by-side these works reveal only the limited range of variability in this method of touch whose historical aim was to fix the body's identity. The works are self-referential twice over: they disclose their own method of production and reflect on the endless, reductive sameness of a positivist body.

With the *Impronte*, the encounter between Manzoni and Pollock takes the form not only of the bodily index, but of linear inscription as well. Pollock's dual indexicality was divided between the gesturality of the skeins and the stasis of the handprints, but Manzoni's touch collapses linear automatism into the corporeal stamp. Manzoni's trace is devoid of discernible gesture or movement, and yet it remains ambiguously linear: an ovoid shape composed of ink-black lines curling inward in biomorphic parallels. Like Pollock's de/lineations, they also hover between line and shape, limit and object. Figure and ground also entwine in the *Impronta*; each is an eddy of lines open to the whiteness around it. The edges of the ovoid are simply so many terminations of linear inscription, leaving the shape open to and invaded by its surrounds. Since the *Impronte* have no contour, the white field of paper cuts into the shape itself to separate one line from another according to the pattern of papillary ridges. Spiraling toward the center along the course of each line, the white ground becomes linear itself, the ghostly double of the inked inscriptions it limns.

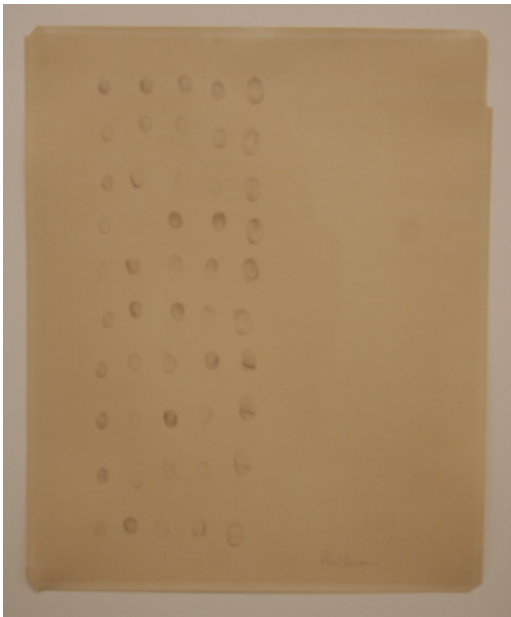


Figure 28. Piero Manzoni. *Impronte*. 1960

In 1961, what began as singular isolated thumbprints begin to multiply in well-ordered lineups across the surface of the paper (Fig. 28). The fingerprints are organized into regiments of rows and columns, and thus the body is yoked to the rationalizing systematicity of the modernist grid; it is divided up and dispersed across the spatial field of the grid itself. The body is trained into

a gridded order of endlessly repeatable semiotic units. Even indexed to the anatomy of the living body itself, biomorphism becomes the object of discipline. As Jaleh Mansoor has written, here the grid—emblem, paradigm, and matrix of modernist abstraction, ideation, and rationality—vanquishes its imagined other.⁹⁹ Perennially repressed within modernism, the terms of corporeality erupt into visibility only to be rendered immanently legible. The geometries of reason which once attempted to flee corporeal contingency can now return to cannibalize the once-feared body. Its storied transgressivity nullified, the body cowers into line.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the fingerprints appear in *Tables of Assessment*, Manzoni's name for a variety of projects that developed beginning in 1961. When a group of Zagreb artists invited Manzoni to submit to the April 1961 issue of the review "Gorgona," he sent a number of small paper booklets in which a single type of

⁹⁹ The argumentation of this paragraph is indebted to Jaleh Mansoor's excellent work on Manzoni, both in her article "We Want to Organicize Disintegration" from *October*, Vol. 95 (Winter, 2001), pp. 28-53, and in her 2007 dissertation *Marshall Plan Modernism: The Monochrome as Matrix of Fifties Abstraction* (New York: Columbia University, 2007).

sign is repeated on each leaf. Between Project No. 1 featuring “letters of the alphabet continually repeated,” and Project No. 3, called simply “Line,” the booklet that was chosen for publication was in fact Project No. 2: “Fingerprints of both of my hands” (Fig. 29). Each page of the diminutive booklet features only a single fingerprint in black ink as a mockup for publication. In a letter to Matko Meštrovič, Manzoni explains that each print should fill an entire page of the magazine and “be reproduced in numerical order,” thereby isolating each print in a syntactic and mathematical logic of succession.¹⁰⁰

It is especially revealing that Manzoni calls these projects *tables*. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault links the drawing up of tables to the techniques of disciplinary power that developed in the 18th century. Like the partitioning and cellularity that define schools and prisons, the spatial dispersal and mutual relationality of elements in a table enables a multiplicity of objects to be brought under visual supervision and rational control. “The table was both a technique of power and a procedure of knowledge,” Foucault explains, “It was a question of organizing the multiple, of providing oneself with an instrument to cover it and to master it; it was a question of imposing upon it an ‘order’.”¹⁰¹ Manzoni's tables isolate individual elements within the context of a portfolio, or gridded elements within the context of a single plate, in the rational assessment of one element to another. Manzoni saw that in a cultural era defined by the utilitarian requirements of industrial systems, that very systematicity would come also to define the parameters of artworks, even and especially on a formal level.

¹⁰⁰ Battino and Palazzoli, p. 121; although No.3 was selected, the project never went to publication.

¹⁰¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 148.

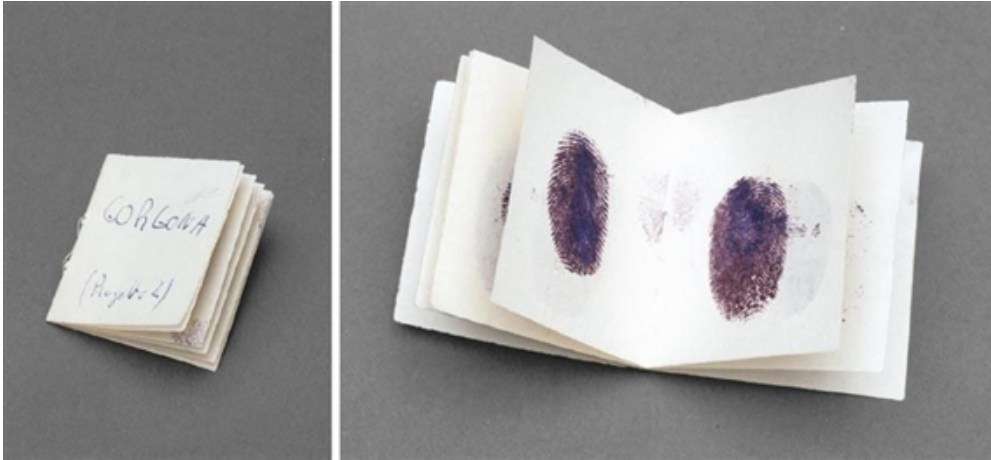


Figure 29. Piero Manzoni. *Tavole di accertamento (Progetto 4)*. 1960

This is not to argue that the body or the self can ever be completely assimilated to positivist rationality, especially since modernist aesthetic practice often thought the body as a domain inaccessible to language. Modernist painting frequently positioned the rational angularities of geometric abstraction specifically against the libidinous biomorphisms of the body, and thus their confrontation in the tables generates tension. The contradictions are most manifest in the fifth *Table of Assessment*, the only single-page submission to Gorgona. It shows the imprints of the fingers of Manzoni's left hand inscribed inside a horizontal arrangement of five black rectangles. The rectangles, ineptly hand-drawn, cannot quite contain the dactylic marks, whose smudged edges spill out into the surrounding space. The geometric order of the rectilinear frames concedes to the inexactitude of the hand that drew it, even as the biomorphic organicity of the hand is constrained to a tabular rationality. But even if the body will always exceed its positivist apprehension—just as Manzoni's fingerprints break their little frames—the body invoked in these works does not reside somehow outside language or history. In assessing the signs of the artist's hand with an analytical rigor, the *Tavole di Accertamento* demarcate the realm of the corporeal as site and product of social relations.

The Italian word *accertamento* has several related meanings: a verification, in the sense of *verifica*; an investigation, in the sense of *indagine*; and a financial assessment for taxation purposes, in the sense of *accertamento fiscale*. It is the word for both a medical examination and a police investigation. Within the context of an art portfolio, these concepts link aesthetic practice to formal research according to rational and even positivistic methods of verification, and explicitly also to matters of finance, crime, and the medicalized body. An *assessment* is an act of valuation or appraisal; an object of assessment is observed and measured according to a system of value, economic or otherwise, and assigned a numerical equivalent: a dollar value, grade, score, or deviation

from statistical norms.¹⁰²



Figure 30. Piero Manzoni.
8 Tables of Assessment. 1958-62

Although the Zagreb collaboration faltered and the Gorgona projects were never published, the elements of these initial *Tavole* will come together later in 1961 for 8 *Tavole di Accertamento*, a portfolio of photolithographs that Manzoni produced between the years 1958 and 1960, printed in 1961, and finally issued together in an edition of sixty in 1962 (Fig. 30, 31).¹⁰³ Fingerprints appear not

only on the cover of the portfolio, but also on the last three of its leaves. The first two leaves from 1958 present images not included in the Gorgona *Tavole*: stark bicolor maps of the island nations Ireland and Iceland, which, like all the images in the portfolio, are printed against a white background. In both images, bold black lines trace along winding

¹⁰² Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “Assessment,” accessed December 5, 2006, <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

¹⁰³ Celant 1991, p.98.

coastlines and small offshore islets. Networks of red veins crisscross Ireland to represent major railroads, whereas the blue line-forms within the Iceland map describe aqueous natural formations such as rivers, lakes, and glaciers. In the second two lithographs, both titled *ABCDEFGH*, Manzoni arranges the first seven letters of the alphabet into a grid formation of six evenly spaced columns of stenciled letters. The first alphabet lithograph in the portfolio features solid letters, the stencils having been filled in with red, whereas in the second alphabet Manzoni traces only the outline of the stencil. The fifth lithograph in the portfolio, entitled simply *Linea* (1959), echoes Gorgona Progetto 3 in offering a single horizontal line, perhaps also a citation of the larger series of tube-enclosed works by the same name that Manzoni produced that year. Thus far, the *8 Tables of Assessment* resembles a metonymic children's primer in red, white, and blue, with pages for geography (maps), language arts (alphabets), and drawing (line). But the final three images are incongruous: they feature the artist's enlarged fingerprints.

In the fifth image, for example, the artist's touch is organized for our examination as biometric information. The dactylic indexes are arranged in the same horizontal grid formation as the record cards for criminals; it is as though Manzoni had put himself under arrest, perhaps for fraud.¹⁰⁴ In the sixth and seventh images, Manzoni then blows up the serigraphic reproductions—as though to submit them as evidence for dactyloscopic analysis in a courtroom—then signs and dates them as artworks. He signs the signs of his own body: another turn on the logic of the *Living Sculpture*, and another entry in his catalogue of works that offer parodic access to the valorized body of the artist, but the composition, reproduction, and magnification of the fingerprints testify to legalistic

¹⁰⁴ For a modern American version of one of these cards, see Cole, *Suspect Identities*, p. 76.

procedures. These last two lithographs show only a giant thumbprint, a choice that may gain particular significance here, in the punning of *pollice* and *polizia*, *thumb* and *police*.



Figure 31. Piero Manzoni. 8 Tables of Assessment. 1958-62

Here we encounter dactylographs as photolithographs, and thus immediately their counterfeit is obvious, their authenticating power evacuated by the infinite reproducibility of the medium. The unique patterns of papillary ridges on the inner surfaces of the artist's fingertips are inked and impressed on paper, then reproduced. These are prints of prints. Their mechanical reproducibility dissolves the magical presence that direct traces like Pollock's handprints might have promised; like Duchamp's *Erotic Objects*, these photolithographs are situated at several stages of remove from the body that produced them. Warhol's appropriated images would also undergo the quasi-mechanical process of silkscreening, a technique of screens and rollers that introduces subtle variability from one identical image to the next, as if baiting the painting to aspire futilely to unique singularity while sucking all aura from the image—flat, serial, and vapid as it is.

Manzoni's technique of photolithography (also called serigraphy) renders an image even flatter, inked without a hint of texture onto the surface of the paper. One serigraph is identical to its doubles, so not even a flicker of variability disrupts the perfect reproducibility of these reproductions.

Semiotically speaking, the eight images of the portfolio begin to evoke a typology. They present each of C.S. Peirce's categories of the sign: icon (maps), symbol (letters) and index (line, fingerprint). Thus, as a catalogue of sign-types, the tables stand metonymically for strategies of signification or classification in general (since Peirce's system aspires to totality).

But what is being assessed here, and why link corporeal indexes to maps and alphabets? These tables certainly represent the tools of assessment itself; that is, mapping and iconicity, language and symbol, and the evidentiary mark of the index. But the referential promiscuity of the tables also suggests that the objects of assessment (land masses/the earth, language/letters, mark-making, the body) stand as metonyms for a greater totality. This is a portfolio of the sign always-already conscripted in the service of an administrative and disciplinary order, a totalizing vision in which not only the earth itself, but human bodies too must be measured and assessed according to a relentless systematicity from which even the realm of art is not safe.¹⁰⁵ All discourse, all images, all bodies and indeed all things must be inscribed within a tabular order, a positivistic dispersal of elements in spatial arrangements that determine their value.

Utilitarian logic of this sort characterizes the neoliberal economics which Manzoni defended in his youth, the same neoliberal theories that inspired Foucault to

¹⁰⁵ Indeed, for the works discussed in Chapter Two, dozens of human bodies, body parts, and ultimately the entire planet are subject to the reifying power of artistic operations.

develop the notion of biopolitics in the first place.¹⁰⁶ For Foucault, the biopolitical order is a matter “...of distributing the living in the realm of value and utility. Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor.”¹⁰⁷ The biopolitical body is subjected to precisely this kind of assessment, and its value to larger systems depends completely on its fixity as an object, on its demonstrable identity: on its fingerprint, as it were.

¹⁰⁶ cf. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

¹⁰⁷ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 144.

II. The Placentarium: Carceral Spectacle

In an interview with *Quel Corp?* in 1975, Michel Foucault identified a shift in the strategies of power that obtained sometime around 1960, from the weighty and constant discipline of the body that had been in development since the eighteenth century, to an attenuated investment of the body that operated as much through desire as through interdiction. “We find a new mode of investment [of the body],” he observed, “which presents itself no longer in the form of control by repression but that of control by stimulation.”¹⁰⁸ The shift he identifies coincides precisely with the triumph of spectacle culture, first elaborated as a globally pervasive phenomenon by Guy Debord in 1967. Although Foucault famously rejected spectacle as a paradigm for power relations, in its chief functions of entrenching alienation and the production of needs—not least through its manifestation in marketing and mass media—spectacle is indeed an engine for the stimulation and manufacture of desire, the self-perpetuating process of total commodification.

In a rare foray into architecture, Manzoni’s design for a theater constructed a model for new forms of bodily subjectivity under the regime of the spectacle. In the July 1961 issue of the West German magazine *Zero*, Manzoni published two proposals for a Pneumatic Theater which he calls *The Placentarium* (Fig. 32).¹⁰⁹ Built of soft plastic, the shell of the theater is borne aloft by air compressors located underground. Like a giant balloon, silver on the outside, white on the inside, the shell describes alternately a perfect

¹⁰⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al., (New York: Pantheon Books), p. 201.

¹⁰⁹ Otto Piene and Heinz Mack, *Zero*, trans. Howard Beckman (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1973), p. 214.

sphere (Proposal A) or the biconical shape of a chicken egg (Proposal B), each roughly 18 meters in diameter. Spectators enter the space from below: in Proposal A, one enters via subterranean tunnel, through an entrance some meters from the sphere; in Proposal B, through a door in the base.¹¹⁰ Inside this placental cavity, the theater provides seventy-three individual cells, which Manzoni calls “alveoli,” the name also for the tiny airsacs in the lungs that facilitate the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. He envisioned light-shows, specifically Otto Piene’s Bauhaus-inspired *Light Ballets* of 1959 to be projected onto the interior of the shell. Manzoni explains in his proposal: “The seats are located and designed so that no member of the audience can see the others, but only the enormous screen. The spectator is enveloped by the screen, by the inside of the sphere.”¹¹¹ Isolated from one another inside each alveolus, the spectators would be administered acoustical and tactile sensations in addition to the flashing lights, for a synaesthetic experience that Manzoni calls “everything that is theatrical in theater.”

¹¹⁰ The specifications “A” and “B,” as in Fig. 30, will be reversed when the drawings are published in *Zero*. See Note 131 for details.

¹¹¹ The text for the proposal, written by Manzoni in July-August of 1960, is taken from the translation in Battino and Palazzoli, p. 106.

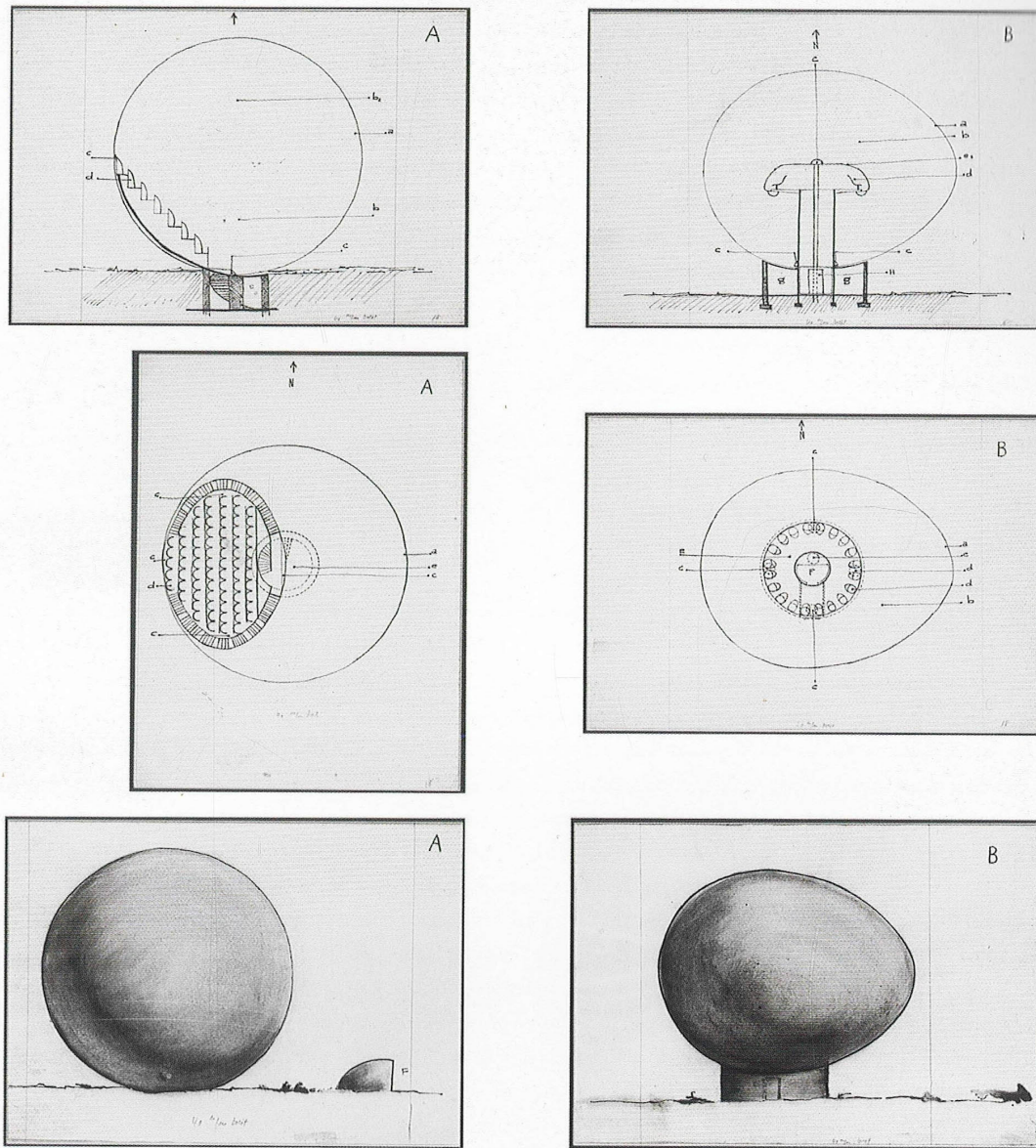


Figure 32. Piero Manzoni. *Placentarium*. 1960

Manzoni's interventions in the artistic currents of postwar Europe represent a critical engagement with emergent spectacle culture and its attendant constructions of subjectivity. In the administrative structure of the projection apparatus, Manzoni constellates a crucial relationship between synaesthetic spectacle and the discipline of the body, a relationship in which subjectivity is locked within its anthropomorphic vise in all

its historical and discursive contingencies. This understanding of the body and the subject, particularly with regard to architectural space, marks Manzoni's work as a significant departure from aesthetic trends that had been in development in neo-avantgarde European culture since the end of WWII. In an era of compensatory idealizations of expansive subjectivity, notably in the work and writings of Frederick Kiesler, Lucio Fontana, and Yves Klein (not to mention Otto Piene, to whom he dedicated the *Placentarium*), Manzoni offers a notion of bodily subjectivity in the grips of an increasingly spectacularized environment.

Though architectural precedents for spherical buildings date back at least as far as Boullée's *Cenotaph for Newton* (1784), Frederick Kiesler suggests the most immediate precedent for an egg-shaped building with *Endless House*, a project the Austrian-born architect began in the late forties and continued to revise until his death in 1965.¹¹² Although never built, *Endless House* was Kiesler's plan for a single-family dwelling whose biomorphic design and so-called "psychological lighting" were intended to integrate its denizens organically with nature, time, and space. A model of the house was exhibited at the Kootz Gallery in 1950, set against giant ferns like a dinosaur egg (Fig. 33).¹¹³ It is very likely that Manzoni was aware of the *Endless House* as he worked on the *Placentarium* a decade later, since not only was Kiesler in frequent correspondence with the Milanese artists of Manzoni's circle throughout the fifties,¹¹⁴ but as early as

¹¹² Frederick Kiesler, *Frederick Kiesler: Endless House*. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003).

¹¹³ Frederick Kiesler. *Frederick Kiesler: Endless House*, p. 45; cited in Demos, "Duchamp's Labyrinth: 'First Papers of Surrealism,' 1942," *October*, Vol. 97 (Summer 2001), p. 104.

¹¹⁴ See *ibid.* and also Kiesler's journals, which chronicle his travels in Italy: *Inside the Endless House: Art People, and Architecture: A Journal*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964).

1951, Lucio Fontana admired the project so much as to praise this “house in the shape of an egg” in his *Technical Manifesto of Spatialism*.¹¹⁵

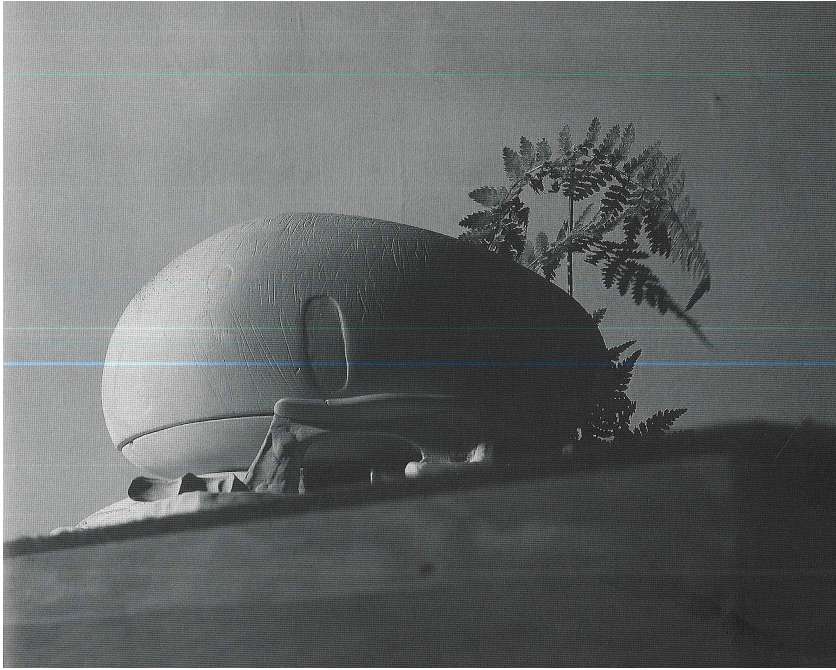


Figure 33. Frederick Kiesler. *Endless House* (model). 1950

Like the *Placentarium*, the *Endless House* formed an ovoid shape whose interior would be illuminated with complex light projections. In an article for the American architectural digest *Interiors* from November 1950, Kiesler described his lighting concept for the egglike domestic space.¹¹⁶ The opening page of the article offers a sketch of a “color clock,” a system of prisms and concave mirrors that would filter sunlight into the interior in gradually shifting colors from dawn to dusk, so that the dweller of the home could tell time by the color of sunlight. Kiesler writes, “The color clock ...is designed to...fill the interior with color and make the dweller organically aware of the continuity

¹¹⁵ Germano Celant, ed., *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1994), p. 715.

¹¹⁶ Reprinted as facsimile in Kiesler et al., *Frederick Kiesler: Endless House* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003), pp. 50-57.

of time. Instead of depending solely on a mechanical clock, splintering his life into minute particles of time, he becomes aware of the continuity of time and of his own dynamic integration with natural forces.”¹¹⁷ Kiesler’s desire is to rescue the dweller from the alienating and fragmenting effects of technology and to restore the subject to a mythic premodern synchronicity with the rhythms of nature. He wants to situate the subject safely within the flow of a natural continuum. The plan for the living area goes even further: a sketch from the article shows sweeping red lines extending out from the interior to the surrounding space. Kiesler explains:

The colored lines on the drawings represent the psychological awareness of space beyond the physical partitions and walls of the endless house which the dweller senses. Instead of being stopped abruptly, as in boxed spaces, the enclosure seems to sweep on past the boundaries of the room and of the house itself, encompassing vast reaches beyond, and yet they return to shelter him and to integrate him within space, instead of isolating him as a lonely pinpoint in all that immensity.¹¹⁸

In Kiesler’s architectural myth of wholeness, the biomorphic womb space of the house and its colored lights expand the subject’s reach beyond its physical limitations to fusion with the surrounding world. Kiesler’s fear of a mechanically splintered life and lonely isolation “in all that immensity” reveals a desire for subjective unity and spatial plenitude, an escape from the shocks of modern life. Such a regressive dialectic of retreat to the womb and transcendence into space recalls Freud’s “oceanic feeling,” the prelinguistic and uterine state in which the infant ego has not yet separated itself off from

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p.53.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p.54-55.

the objects of the world, but is nonetheless sheltered by the mother's body.¹¹⁹ Kiesler wishes to dissolve the materiality of architecture and even the body itself, to restore the subject to total metaphysical integration with its environment.

The fantasy of the subject's expansion into space found ample elaboration in the overtly Icarian fantasies of many of the artists in Manzoni's sphere, among them Lucio Fontana and Yves Klein, two key figures for Manzoni's work in general. Though their attitudes toward technology differed, these artists shared an idealist interest in dematerialized flight-fantasy, which they mythologized in a variety of aesthetic and textual operations. In close association with Manzoni and with each other, Fontana and Klein bolstered aesthetic tendencies in mid-century Europe that valorized both the artist and his works (I use the pronoun advisedly) as agents of spiritual and even physical transcendence. It is with such romantic spiritualism—at best, historical naiveté; at worst, cynical guile—that Manzoni effects a critical break.¹²⁰

Fontana and his followers took the name "Spatialism" for their art, and articulated in no fewer than four manifestoes their desire to dissolve materiality and transcend space. "Today," they wrote in 1947, "the human spirit aspires, in a transcendent reality, to transcend the particular to arrive at the United, the Universal, through an act of spirit

¹¹⁹ Freud introduces the notion of the "oceanic feeling" in *Civilization and its Discontents*. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1962), pp. 11-13.

¹²⁰ In the following treatment of Fontana and Klein, I do not wish to subsume the artists and their production entirely under a brief and reductive analysis; I merely wish to sketch some of the terms and concepts at stake in contemporary European artistic practice to highlight the radicality of Manzoni's interventions.

freed from all material.”¹²¹ A year later, they boasted, “Today we, the spatial artists, have fled our cities, broken our shells, our physical crust, and seen ourselves from above, photographing the Earth from flying rockets.”¹²² In Spatialist fantasy, the self breaks free from its physical container, both architectural and corporeal, to soar through the air high above. Bounded neither by a biological body nor by the laws of physics, the spatialist subject expands to conquer and transcend space in an effort to recover what they call “our true face, our true image.”¹²³ This is not merely idealist metaphor. Fontana and the Spatialists invested faith in technology to free them from gravity, and their manifestoes frequently called on scientists to collaborate in the production of technologically liberating art forms. In the *Manifesto of the Spatialist Movement for Television*, for instance, they declared that the new medium of television was exactly what they had been waiting for, and announced their proud intention to project television into the sky from Italy.¹²⁴ It is unclear how this project—never completed, needless to say—would have been technically realized, but in its constellation of flight-fantasy, technocratic spiritualism, and simultaneous collective reception, it is not difficult to detect echoes of a previous generation of Italian artists.

In the postwar Italy of Fontana and his followers, Marinetti’s protofascist obsession with speed and flight is rescripted as a spiritual journey, a fantasy of spatial

¹²¹ Beniamino Joppolo, Lucio Fontana, Giorgio Kaiserlian, Milena Milani, “First Manifesto of Spatialism,” reprinted in Celant, *The Italian Metamorphosis*, p.713.

¹²² Lucio Fontana, Gianni Dova, Beniamino Joppolo, Giorgio Kaiserlian, Antonino Tullier, “Second Manifesto of Spatialism,” reprinted in *ibid.*, p.713.

¹²³ *Ibid.* p. 713

¹²⁴ Reprinted in *ibid.* p. 717. Public light projections and large-scale aerial installations would subsequently become a chief concern for members of the Zero Group, with whom Manzoni was affiliated. Not least of these was Otto Piene, who designed *Light Ballets* for the Placentarium.

conquest and out-of-body encounters with the infinite. Rather than the bombs and blasts of Futurism, the Spatialists wish their rockets to make appear in the sky “artificial forms, rainbows of wonder, luminous writings.”¹²⁵ In the immediate wake of the catastrophe of WWII, with its very real destruction and fragmentation, the Spatialist’s futile wish is to achieve a moment of total synthesis, to dissolve matter in a fantastic flight into both space and amnesia. It is perhaps telling that Fontana declines to engage with the cultural collapse of Europe, since he happily collaborated with the Italian fascists before fleeing to Argentina during the war. In the hagiographic dissertation *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch*, Anthony White concedes that Fontana’s practice throughout the thirties was rife with affirmative collaboration with fascist propaganda.¹²⁶ We learn that Fontana won a prize for a bust of *Il Duce*, painted a self-portrait in fascist blackshirt, and regularly submitted works to official exhibitions. No surprise, then, that the artist would take solace in futuristic fantasy through a sunny, inoculated recoding of fascist aesthetics.

Likewise Kiesler, long before he brushed shoulders with Fontana and company, could collaborate with the Surrealists only at the moment of their total abandonment of political radicalism. Breton and his coterie had left for New York as the Nazis overran their beloved Paris, and it was in there, in the rarefied atmosphere of Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery, that Kiesler’s program of womb-returns and spatial diffusion became attractive to an avant-garde resolved to political powerlessness. In his excellent essay “Duchamp’s Labyrinth,” T.J. Demos links Kiesler’s surrealist exhibition designs, as well as the *Endless House* itself, to the failure of the avant-garde in the face of political

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 713.

¹²⁶ Anthony George White. *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch*. (Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, 2000).

barbarism and geopolitical displacement. Demos writes, “[Kiesler’s] emphasis on biomorphic shapes, the attempt to fuse the viewer with an egglike or uterine form...represented one response to the experience of geopolitical deracination: to regress to a primordial intrauterine form.”¹²⁷ If the wartime despair of a waning and exiled avant-garde was expressed as withdrawal from the world into uterine comfort, the generation of Italian artists in the years following WWII sought to disavow the constraints of the body altogether.

Fontana’s Icarian aspirations found an even more literal and enthusiastic proponent in Yves Klein. A self-proclaimed mystic, Klein frequently swore he could levitate, and often boasted of his “realistico-imaginary” journeys to the other side of the sky. He even claimed to have signed the sky as an adolescent, his “greatest and most beautiful work.”¹²⁸ As evidence of his ability to fly, in 1960 Klein distributed *The Leap into the Void*, the now-infamous photograph of the artist plunging off a second-story ledge above a street. The photograph is actually a montage of two images, the invisible seam between which runs just above the treeline in the overexposed sky. The *reductio ad absurdum* of the postwar trend in subjective expansion, Klein’s assertions of supernatural powers transpose the psychic fusion of a Kiesler or the technocratic romance of a Fontana into the dissonant key of interested delusion. The complex tangle of chicanery, bathos, and aesthetic innovation that wends through Klein’s oeuvre generally found expression in spectacles of self-promotion choreographed to grandiose mystical declarations, like the

¹²⁷ Demos, “Duchamp’s Labyrinth,” p. 105.

¹²⁸ From the “Chelsea Hotel Manifesto, 1961,” reprinted in Yves Klein, *Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial* (New York: Delano Greenridge Editions, 2000), p. 88.

Le Vide exhibition, for instance, or public displays of art production set to orchestral accompaniment.¹²⁹

Klein imagined a spiritual force behind his artworks that he called “immaterial (or indefinable) pictorial sensibility,” a sphere of spiritual plenty to which he claimed direct access through the intercession of the color blue. In a brazen alliance of mysticism and economics so typical of Klein, the allegedly transcendent power of his favorite color did not prevent the artist from copyrighting the deep ultramarine hue under his own name: IKB, or International Klein Blue. He wrote in 1957, “Through color, I experience a feeling of complete identification with space, I am truly free...by saturating myself with the eternal limitless sensitivity of space, I return to Eden.”¹³⁰ Deftly overlaying spatial conquest with a return to origins, Klein makes of space itself the domain of primordial spirit, to be experienced and manipulated through the aesthetic sacraments of the mystical subject and his copyrighted color.

In Manzoni’s hands, conversely, dreams of liberating spectacle and mythic returns are definitively reversed in the confining and isolating alveoli of the *Placentarium*. Manzoni’s materialism renders Icarian idealism flightless. In a clear critique of Klein, he once wrote, “You cannot get off the ground merely by running and jumping; you need wings.” Manzoni reminds his contemporaries that even the mythic flight of Icarus required material supports. Rather than transcend the body and its architectural container, Manzoni’s subject is securely enveloped in its material shells of both corporeal flesh and architectural plastic, unable to see or hear anything but projected lights and electronic sounds. The pods are proportioned to contain the individual body, and its

¹²⁹ Cf. Chapter Two of this dissertation.

¹³⁰ Klein, *Long Live the Immaterial*, p. 88.

synaesthetic apparatus is addressed to individual sensoria directly. If his invocation of egg-spaces appears inviting, it serves only as a lure: this is no primordial refuge, no immaterial plenitude. Manzoni's vision is not articulated in a postwar malaise of compensatory illusion, but rather in a forthright declaration of the emergent era of spectacle and all its threats.

If, in Manzoni's work, bodies and subjectivity are frequently shown to be vulnerable to or even products of discursive and institutional apparatuses, to what new regime of power are they subjected in the *Placentarium*? Given the artist's varied assaults on autonomous subjectivity, what do we imagine to be taking place within this placental projection room? When its shell opens and its alveoli exhale their contents back out into the world, to what kind of subject would the *Placentarium* give birth?

Let us examine its proposal in greater detail. In both plans, spectators are visually isolated from one another in the alveoli. Spectators are never visible to one another; all they see is the giant screen that envelops them. Also in both plans, systems of speakers and vibrators deliver direct stimuli to each body, while flashing projections dance across the colossal screen. The body of the spectator is absorbed into the mechanical womb-lung of the *Placentarium*, which administers to its collection of isolated subjects a totality of sensory experience. Manzoni imagines his spectators in total thrall of aesthetic overload. The project manifests simultaneous collective experience that is atomized both to control individual sensoria directly and to preclude the psychic coherence of a crowd. If Manzoni's other engagements with bodily appropriation or alienation could be construed as a mechanisms of enlightenment (a putatively liberating process), the *Placentarium* emerges as a spectatorial training ground. Through synaesthetic shocks

administered directly to individuated bodies, those bodies are schooled and disciplined in the aesthetic regime of the spectacle. Manzoni's invocation of the placenta operates as a figure not for sexual reproduction, but rather for ontogeny, that is, the physical formation of the body. Manzoni eschews mythic notions of maternal yearnings and the universalized Freudian subject for an exploration of the body as the site of subjectivity-formation under the sign of spectacle: the construction of the body becomes both figure and locus for the construction of subjectivity. The pneumatic theater presumes, addresses, and indeed manufactures the spectacular subject.

The existence of two plans, one a sphere, the other an egg, is very significant, and doubles back on the biopolitical project initiated with the *Uova*. Beyond their external morphological differences, the major difference between the egg-plan and the sphere-plan is inside, in the manner of arranging the seat-cells called alveoli. In the spherical proposal, the alveoli are arranged at one side of the theater, in the traditional orientation found in movie theaters and playhouses. In the ovoid proposal, however, rows of alveoli are deployed around the circumference of a radial viewing platform, in an arrangement that constellates a critical connection between spectacularized consumption and techniques of surveillance.

The ovoid theater, with its cellular confinement, central viewing tower, and echoes of the criminological *Uova*, presents a direct architectural inversion of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (Fig. 34). The *Placentarium* turns the architecture of the Panopticon inside out, to appear less its opposite than its complement, its other, its double. The triumph of carceral visibility rules the Placentarium as it did the prison, but

here the individual cells have moved from the exterior walls to the central viewing tower, and this time it is the prisoners who are enjoined to observe.

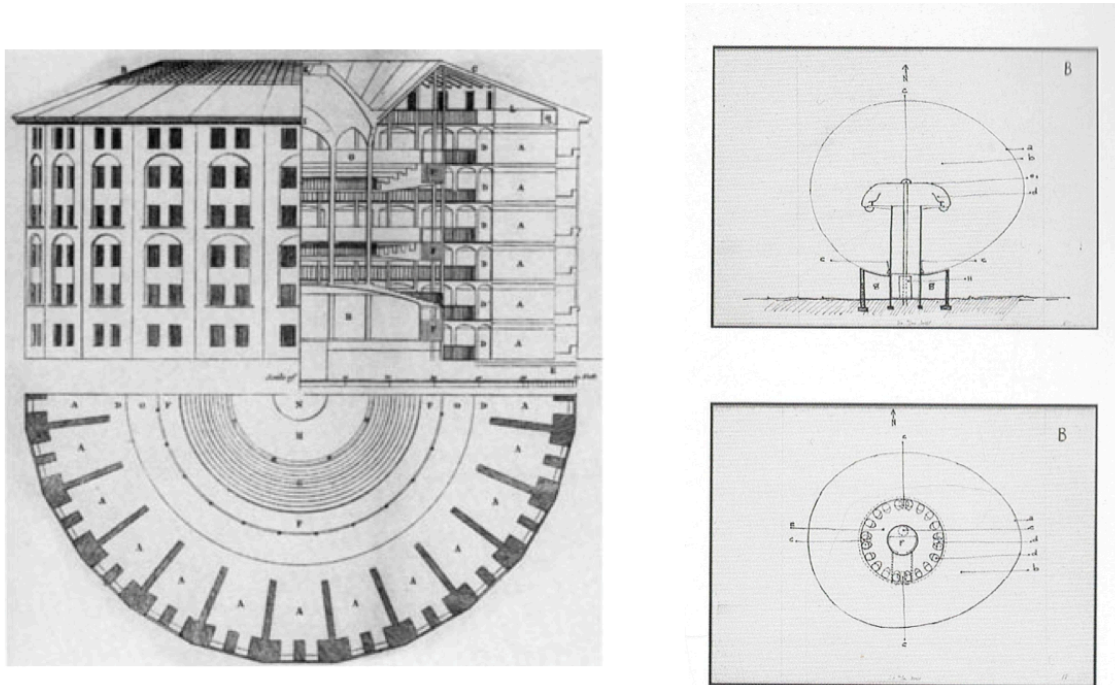


Figure 34. Left: Panopticon. Right: Piero Manzoni. Placentarium (plan). 1960

It has often been remarked that in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault rejects notions of spectacle—like Debord’s—as antique relations of power. He famously wrote, “Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance... We are neither in the amphitheater nor on the stage but in the Panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power.”¹³¹ But critics like Tony Bennet and Jonathan Crary have since challenged Foucault’s dismissal. Foucault may have opposed spectacle and surveillance as incompatible structures, but in the years since their theoretical elaboration, it has become increasingly clear that these

¹³¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 217, also partially quoted in Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), p. 17.

poles form complementary rather than contradictory arrangements. In the introduction to his 1990 volume *Techniques of the Observer*, Crary notes:

Foucault's opposition of surveillance and spectacle seems to overlook how the effects of these two regimes of power can coincide. Using Bentham's panopticon as a primary theoretical object, Foucault relentlessly emphasizes the ways in which human subjects became objects of observation...but he neglects the new forms by which vision itself became a kind of discipline or mode of work.¹³²

Though Crary elaborates those modes of work in nineteenth-century optical devices, the list that follows echoes precisely the apparatus of the *Placentarium*. He continues:

“[There were] techniques for the management of attention, for imposing homogeneity, anti-nomadic procedures that fixed and isolated the observer using partitioning and cellularity...in which the individual is reduced as a political force.”¹³³ A fitting description of both the architectural structure and the operations of power it allegorizes, Crary's list applies equally to the *Placentarium* and the Panopticon. Indeed, Crary derives “partitioning” and “cellularity” from Foucault's discussion of docile bodies in *Discipline and Punish*; based on the monastic cell, disciplinary architecture divides space according to the principle of enclosure.¹³⁴ To each body, its own cell.

The architecture of Manzoni's pneumatic theater can thus be read as a spectacular mirror of the Panopticon, a theoretical object for the spectacle as a necessary complement to surveillance. I want to be clear about my intentions, since all too often in discussions

¹³² Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 18.

¹³³ Ibid. p. 18.

¹³⁴ Foucault writes, “It does this first of all on the principle of elementary location or partitioning. Each individual has his own place; and each place its individual....Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed.” See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 143.

of Debord, spectacular relations as the paradigm of advanced capitalism are subsumed into their symptoms such as cinema or television. Just as the Panopticon acts in Foucault as a *theoretical model* for a society of surveillance—as its allegorical architecture as well as a site of its operation—so too does the cinema function in Debord not as a synonym for spectacle but as an allegory and manifestation of the complex social relations called spectacle culture.¹³⁵ Cinema, ever the privileged figure for the monstrous power of spectacle, becomes radicalized in Manzoni's *Placentarium* as the mirror image of the Panopticon: the spectacle as the perfect and indeed necessary complement to surveillance.

I have called the Placentarium a training ground. What the project demonstrates is not that spectacle trumps surveillance, nor even that they “coincide” or exist in tandem, but that spectacle is itself a discipline. Foucault explains how subjectivity is formed as the body becomes the object of social processes. The body under conditions of surveillance is trained in particular postures of compliance; it is molded—conceptually, discursively, and even physically—in a particular formation. The body and its subjectivities under conditions of spectacle are likewise cultivated in such a way as to adhere to protocols of spectacularity. I am not the first to say this. In the final, devastating paragraph of their chapter on the Culture Industry, Adorno and Horkheimer observe the incredible depth and nuance with which the protocols of mass cultural entertainments have permeated even the most intimate and quotidian forms of speech and bodily gesture. Did they not also observe that the beatings of the cartoon character help

¹³⁵ See Thoms Y. Levin, “Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002).

to prepare the audience for their own?¹³⁶ Thinking of this training within the Foucauldian framework of discipline allows us to see this “preparation” in bodily as well as psychological terms, the bodily preparation to receive (or administer) a beating during the aesthetico-psychic process of identification and suturing that takes place upon viewing a film, advertisement or TV show, but also the entire program of bodily actions, movements, tensions and relaxations that accompany the habits of spectacularized spectatorship in general. If soft and docile bodies are an effect of disciplinary regimes of power, it should come as no surprise that the rise of spectacle is accompanied by the advent of an increasingly sedentary lifestyle and correlated obesity rates, and an ersatz culture in which spectators are more invested in the latest football game or sitcom premiere than in the latest war.

It is also fitting that Manzoni should choose Piene’s *Light Ballets* for the visual aspect of the placental spectacle. Content, for Adorno and Horkheimer, is but a withering veil for the eternally elaborated manufacture of sameness, which the producers of industrial culture barely even bother to disguise as such even as they invent innumerable variations on its devices. It is notable therefore that the *Light Ballets* are devoid of explicit “content;” they are mechanically projected lights in continuous motion, a ghostly echo of spectacle as pure form, a formal spectre of spectacular apparatus. Moreover, the fact that these are called *ballets* evokes of the mechanization of the body and the extinguishment of corporeal aura in the rationalized synchronicity of the 19th-century ballet lineup. Recall Degas’ uncanny, fungible, and doll-like automata. Recall Maret’s chronophotographic analysis of both balletic movement and factory work. The

¹³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 110.

Placentarial alveolus envelops the individual body to conscript its sensorial and aesthetic capacities to an apparatus of a totalized, fluid mechanicity. Each body is distinct, yet each is likewise the same (not unlike ballet rats). Each is enjoined to perform the same choreography; each is administered the same sensorial effects.

Lest it be objected that the striking architectural and theoretical complementarity between Bentham's prison and Manzoni's theater still provides insufficient grounds to draw associations between them as allegorical objects, there remains the curious matter of the egg shape. The choice of a lopsided morphology seems strange, given the radial arrangement of constricted sightlines dictated by the circular central platform. Spectators facing east would sit considerably farther away from the interior screen than spectators facing north, south, or west. For the sake of uniformity of viewing distance alone, the sphere would seem a much more logical choice for centralized alveoli. Stranger still, it appears that the ovoid morphology and viewing platform only entered the project as a revision of the original sphere, in which the alveoli were arranged in the manner of a traditional theater, facing east against the western wall. The first model and proposal for the Placentarium make no mention of eggs or platforms; it is only a year later, in *Zero* No. 3 of July 1961, that an egg appears alongside the sphere.¹³⁷ If the theater can be read as an architectural inverse of the Panopticon, why should Manzoni depart so deliberately from a circular plan? In short, what does an egg have to do with a prison?

¹³⁷ I should note that there remains some confusion surrounding the exact date of birth for the ovoid plan, particularly since the *Placentarium* has received such scanty critical attention. Although the egg almost certainly succeeds the sphere, the plans and elevations for both proposals were executed sometime in 1960, with the sphere marked "A" and the egg "B." When these drawings were published the following summer, Manzoni had inverted the lettering, as though to assert the primacy of the egg over the older prototype.

A few theories suggest themselves. Although it is true that Bentham's panoptic prison has frequently been called a "Columbus' egg in the order of politics," such an argument fails to prove the egg-prison connection because it presupposes the association we are attempting to support.¹³⁸ Could the egg be simply a critique of Kiesler? Although the alienated subject of the *Placentarium* does construct an alternative to prevailing models of integrated womb-dwellers, Kiesler remained a somewhat peripheral figure for Manzoni, and a straightforward critique of *Endless House* still brings us no closer to prisons or surveillance. Instead, the reason for an egg-shaped theater, as well as the grounds for its implication in the power relations of spectacle/surveillance, is far more likely to be found in the *Eggs* themselves, that is, in the *Uova* series that Manzoni produced at the very time the pneumatic theater proposal was under development.

The *Uova* series thus redoubles the carceral implications of the *Placentarium*. In fact, the two projects can claim a chiasmic relationship: whereas the *Uova* exhibition-events mobilized biometric techniques of surveillance within the context of a synaesthetic spectacle, the *Placentarium* articulates techniques of synaesthetic spectacle within the framework of surveillance.

In its overt, even violent enactment of spectacularized spectatorship, can this work be called a critique of spectacle? Linked as it is to a carceral order, the work can hardly be accused of celebrating spectacle, but in appropriating the means of spectacular power, the theater functions in a mimetic fashion, enmeshing the body and the subject in a system of power relations. Debord himself conceded this danger even as he wrote the *Society of the Spectacle*:

¹³⁸ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 146.

In order to describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions and whatever forces may hasten its demise, a few artificial distinctions are called for. To analyze the spectacle means talking its language to some degree—to the degree, in fact, that we are obliged to engage the methodology of the society to which the spectacle gives expression.¹³⁹

To grapple with the structures of power can often risk reproducing them. Neither an uncritical embrace nor resistant critique, the *Placentarium* and other spectacular works of Manzoni's appropriate the methodology of the spectacle both as means of its analysis and as an acknowledgment of the emergent primacy of spectacle within aesthetic production and consumption. The work of art or art-event, as it were, becomes increasingly unable to criticize relations of power from the outside position of an autonomous discipline, and must either engage from within or succumb entirely. The proposal does launch a critical negation of aesthetic currents at the time, which alternately disavowed alienation in myths of escape, or welcomed the age of spectacle as spiritual liberation. Surrounded on all sides by faith-structures and aesthetic mysticism, Manzoni summons the Icarian subject only to clip his wings. Upon entering the alveolus, the Icarian subject gets locked in the concentric jails of its body and its cell, an isolated prisoner in the lonely crowd. If Klein and the Spatialists believed they could fly, Manzoni rolls out an avian object that grounds the subject decisively. The strange subject that emerges from this chicken egg is, appropriately enough, a flightless one, its body well-trained in docility, its senses well-schooled in passivity.

¹³⁹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p.15.

III. The Labyrinth: “Useful for Brainwashing”

It may be well to recall that [mass society's] initial science of economics, which substitutes patterns of behavior only in its rather limited field of human activity, was finally followed by the all-comprehensive pretension of the social sciences which, as 'behavioral sciences,' aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal.

Hanna Arendt¹⁴⁰

The last words Piero Manzoni ever published were these: “[It] could perhaps be useful for psychological tests and brainwashing.” The statement, all the more astonishing for its antiseptic tone, appears at the end of “Alcuni Realizzazioni,” the final sentence of his final text, published near the end of his short life. The last phrase, “lavaggi il cervello,” a literal translation of the English neologism “brainwashing,” was still quite new to Italian, having entered the lexicon only a few years earlier.¹⁴¹ But Manzoni’s statement does not refer to the labs of behaviorist scientists or the internment camps of totalitarian regimes—the sites at which “brainwashing” was alleged to take place. Instead, he is referring to a work of art, one of his own in fact, a proposed architectural environment that he calls the Labyrinth.

The proposal for the Labyrinth first appears in his short text for the Placentarium. “Regarding a more direct participation of the spectator-individual in the spectacle,” he writes, “I have another project that seeks to bring those who are normally part of an

¹⁴⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 45.

¹⁴¹ Diego Zancani, “Italian-American Linguistic Borrowings,” in *Italy in the Cold War: Politics, Culture, and Society 1948-58*, ed. Christopher Duggan and Christopher Wagstaff (Washington, D.C.: Oxford, 1995), p. 182.

audience into a bon a fide protagonist role.”¹⁴² In nearly all of the literature on this particular artist, this work has merited barely a mention. Merely a text, never physically realized, this work offers perhaps the darkest side of Manzoni yet. Not only does the labyrinth further clarify his critical engagement with Icarian themes of his artistic milieu, it also elaborates a particular psychology of participatory spectatorship. The proposal reads, in part:

The spectator will enter a sort of labyrinth composed of numerous cells of various sizes (around 60) controlled by a mechanical brain...For some the trip will be dull, for others it will be unsettling. For instance, from one cell he will actually be expelled; from another he won't be able to find the way out. The ceiling will descend as though to crush him, and when he will be close to realizing how to escape, a voice will insult and obstruct him: on the basis of his reaction, the exit he finds will bring him into one circuit or another: in one room he will be blinded by light, in another he will be plunged into the most absolute darkness and sink into a rubber floor. In yet another a system of mirrors will give him the impression of walking on the ceiling, etc...¹⁴³

In the labyrinth, the *Placentarium*'s unilateral stream of sensory shocks is reimagined as an interactive model in spatial and temporal succession. The audience remains captive, enveloped, but this time the viewer is forced to negotiate a frightening system of catacombs. Like a laboratory rat in a maze, the spectator moves through a series of changing interfaces that respond to her reactions with a variety of aesthetic manipulations, by turns violent, abusive, and disorienting. Like the *Placentarium*, the *Labyrinth* enacts the aesthetic crisis of an overwhelmed sensorium, and in both proposals,

¹⁴² Celant 2009, p. 205.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 107-108 (translation modified). Manzoni's project also bears comparison to the Daniel Spoerri's contemporaneous *Autotheater* (1961). See Daniel Spoerri, "Spoerri's Autotheater" in Otto Piene and Heinz Mack, *Zero*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), p. 217-218.

the body is physically absorbed into a nightmarishly authoritarian environment.¹⁴⁴

Manzoni's vision of the Labyrinth not only provides a dark parody of the shocks of urban life under the conditions of an increasingly technologized environment, but it also offers a postwar revision of a mythological topos around which several preceding generations of artists had oriented their practice. The Labyrinth traces roots as deep as myth itself, particularly in Mediterranean cultures, but as each new generation takes up the topos, the story is voiced in a different timbre. What did the notion of a Labyrinth mean to an artist working in 1960, and what could this have to do with psychological tests and brainwashing? Furthermore, what might it mean for a visual artist to link these spheres in his practice?

Genealogy of a Topos

To track the topos of the labyrinth in the twentieth century would require a dissertation of its own. The list of luminaries for whom the labyrinth held fascination reads like a survey of avant-garde art, literature, and philosophy: Bataille, Borges, Breton, Calvino, Debord, Derrida, Duchamp, Joyce, Kafka, Lacan, Morris, Foucault, Pollock, and Robbe-Grillet, and the list could go on and on. As essayist Guy Davenport puts it, "The labyrinth...became a life-symbol of our [twentieth] century...And so did Daedalus, Icarus, and their wings."¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October*, Vol. 62 (Autumn 1992), pp. 3-41.

¹⁴⁵ Guy Davenport, *The Geography of Imagination*, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), p. 51; also partially cited in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 229n. Not surprisingly, the topoi of labyrinths and Icarus appear often in Jay's landmark study of vision.

In Manzoni's era, the labyrinth appears to take on new urgency in the visual arts. Frank Stella painted a *Labyrinth* in 1960, the same year the Situationists proposed an installation entitled "Die Welt als Labyrinth" at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.¹⁴⁶ The Parisian artists' collective Groupe de Recherche d'art Visuel (GRAV) gave the title *Labyrinth* to the series of environments and events that comprised their 1963 contribution to the Paris Biennial.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, the motif is invoked with special frequency for works that, like Manzoni's, involve installation, participation, or otherwise immersive spectatorship.

Polysemic and overdetermined, the paths of the topos throughout its various modern and postmodern incarnations prove as winding and treacherous as the mythic maze itself, but the imaginative architecture of these labyrinths are erected on a common conceptual terrain. The motif of the labyrinth is a literary space inhabited by a cast of characters—Theseus, Ariadne, Daedalus, Icarus, Minos, and of course the Minotaur—whose discursive significance emerges in their interactions with the maze-structure and its processes. As Theseus makes his way through the labyrinth, for instance, the twisting walls prevent a synoptic visual account of the paths ahead; the God's-eye view is abolished and vision itself profoundly limited.¹⁴⁸ A journey into the labyrinth is a retreat from enlightened vision and into the crepuscular realm of unknowing, at whose heart lurks the bestial Minotaur. The labyrinth is a challenge precisely because its architecture

¹⁴⁶ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Brooklyn: Verso 2012), p. 81; see also Libero Andreotti's "Architecture and Play" in McDonough, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, p. 228.

¹⁴⁷ See Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, pp. 88-90

¹⁴⁸ See Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, Chapter 4. The inadequacy of vision is also a frequent topic in early psychological experiments involving rodents and mazes.

practices to deceive; it both tests and undermines cognition in a mortal confrontation with a monstrous half-human. To defeat the maze and its beast became a figure for self-determination in the triumph of reason. As such, the labyrinth's chief mode of operation is as a dialectical struggle of human/animal, rationality/irrationality, mind/body, and ideal/material. In the twentieth century, such labyrinthine dialectics wind through the works of the Surrealists and splatter across Jackson Pollock's canvases, and it is from these generations that Manzoni and his colleagues inherited the topos. But both the Surrealists and Pollock reimagined the myth against more classicizing accounts in which the trope of "escape from the labyrinth" meant the eternal battle of the rational mind with bestial body, a struggle of instincts in which personal morality and civilization itself are at stake.

A chief exponent of what could be called the "classical labyrinth" was the 19th century critic and artist John Ruskin. The labyrinth myth was a favorite theme of Ruskin's, and its figures and metaphors appear frequently in his work. At Oxford, for instance, he delivered a series of talks named after Ariadne, and his *Aratra Pentelici* lectures on the elements of sculpture include a detailed analysis of the Daedalus character.¹⁴⁹ Ruskin's most extensive meditation on the myth comes in the *Fors Clavigera*, a series of monthly epistles published for the moral and cultural edification of the English working class. In Letter XXIII of the *Fors*, entitled simply "The Labyrinth," the maze and the monster at its center stood for the chaos of primal drives which, threatening dissolution to the individual and to the organized community, must be mastered by the rational mind. Ruskin explains, "this Minotaur is the type or

¹⁴⁹ John Ruskin, *Aratra Pentelici: Seven Lectures on the Elements of Sculpture* (New York: C.E. Merrill & Co., 1891), pp. 230-234.

embodiment of the two essentially bestial sins of Anger and Lust;... both of these are in the human nature, interwoven inextricably with its chief virtue, Love.”¹⁵⁰ Born of the unnatural lust of a human woman for a bull, the Minotaur embodies the duality of human nature, the animal passions which are nonetheless “interwoven inextricably” with rational virtues. The inevitable fate of humanity, then, is the constant struggle of these linked forces. As in the myth, the battleground is the labyrinth and the hero is Theseus, whom Ruskin calls, “the exterminator of every bestial and savage element, and the type of human, or humane power...summed in the terms, ‘Gentleness and Justice.’”¹⁵¹ Having conquered the treacherous paths of the labyrinth, Ruskin’s Theseus also makes the roads safe for travel by banishing both thieves and wild beasts, thereby linking the bestial to the criminal in contradistinction to the peace-bringing power of rational humanity.

In fact, Ruskin’s various glosses on the myth make repeated reference to the theme of criminal justice. His exegesis of the Minotaur continues, “And the right interweaving of Anger and Love, in criminal justice, is the main question of earthly law, which the Athenian lawgiver had to deal with.”¹⁵² Mastery of irrational drives may be the task for each individual—particularly, for Ruskin, the proletarians of England to whom the *Fors Clavigera* was addressed—but the task finds a collective correlative at the level of criminal law. Punishment for lawbreakers must be meted out with a righteous anger tamed by virtuous rationality. Ruskin reminds us that Minos reappears in Dante’s *Inferno* as a giant rat-like judge who, though unable to reward goodness like his

¹⁵⁰ John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera* (Sunnyside: George Allen, 1899), p. 475. It is striking how Ruskin’s imbrication of aggression and eros anticipates psychoanalytic developments of the twentieth century.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

¹⁵² *ibid.*, p. 475.

colleague Rhadamanthus, dispenses punishment for evildoers by coiling his colossal tail around his body to denote the level of Hell—also a spiral with a monster at its center—to which the damned are condemned.¹⁵³ The Cretan labyrinth over which Minos presided was, after all, a prison for both the Minotaur and unlucky Daedalus.

Ruskin might aspire to the condition of the “exterminator” Theseus, but the hero does not solve the labyrinth on his own; it is the love and cleverness of Ariadne that make it possible. Ruskin cites—in Latin, English, and engraved facsimile—the inscription on the cathedral doors of Lucca:

This is the labyrinth which the Cretan Daedalus built,
Out of which nobody could get who was inside,
Except Theseus; nor could he have done it, unless he had
been helped with a thread by Ariadne, all for love.¹⁵⁴

Ariadne’s thread, not coincidentally the work of human ingenuity, contravenes against the bestial trap with the promise of conquest, escape, a way out. The red thread marks the convoluted but ultimately linear journey into self-knowledge and knowledge of (that is, power over) one’s self and one’s world. That this inscription appears on the portico of a medieval Italian church is significant; Ruskin can trace Ariadne’s thread along a glorious Latinate tradition binding present to past, Modern to Classical, and even the “rough Northern race”¹⁵⁵ to Mediterranean antiquity.¹⁵⁶ Transported out of time and body, Ruskin can project the guiding Idea of Theseus across all of human history.

¹⁵³ Ruskin, *Aratra Pentelici*, p. 232.

¹⁵⁴ Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, p. 461.

¹⁵⁵ Ruskin, *Aratra Pentelici*, p. 232.

¹⁵⁶ Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, p. 463; Ruskin’s twenty-second letter is at pains to excavate the Daedalus myth in the English nursery rhyme “The House that Jack Built,” the structure of which is compared with the labyrinth. He also unearths the myth in Shakespeare and Chaucer.

Theseus may be, he writes, “An idea only; yet one that has ruled all minds of men to this hour, from the hour of its first being born, a dream, into this practical and solid world. Ruled, and still rules, in a thousand ways...But you never pass a day without being brought, somehow, under the power of Theseus.”¹⁵⁷ Ruskin’s humanist and idealist mythology valorizes rationality over irrationality, human over beast, ideal over material, in a Platonic separation of mind and body that posits eternal values at work even in a modern world which rejects them. The Ruskinian thread of mind promises liberation from the labyrinthine body.

For the Surrealists, however, it is the Labyrinth and the Minotaur themselves that become the fêted objects. In the 1930’s, even after the historic split of French Surrealism into competing factions led respectively by Andre Breton and Georges Bataille, the labyrinth myth emerged as a central framework for the articulation of the Surrealist agenda. Both Breton’s journal *Minotaure* and Bataille’s vehicle *Acephale* explicitly valorized the irrational bestiality of the labyrinth myth.¹⁵⁸ Man Ray famously visualized *Minotaure*’s eponym in his 1934 two-page spread of a headless, ambiguously-gendered bull-human hybrid. Bataille’s likewise acephalic subject, as illustrated in 1936 by Andre Masson on the first cover of *Acephale*, was said to hold the labyrinth in his bowels. Bataille extols, “He is not a man. He is not a God either. He is not me but more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 460.

¹⁵⁸ See Krauss, “Corpus Delicti,” *October*, Vol. 33 (Summer, 1985), pp. 37-38. Krauss credits Bataille with introducing the trope into surrealism, ultimately adopted even for the title of his rival Breton’s journal.

I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster.”¹⁵⁹ For Surrealists like Bataille, Ariadne’s thread leads Theseus *into* the maze where he confronts the Minotaur, as it were, like an image in a mirror. Bataille also authored an essay entitled “The Labyrinth,” and he delights in the “rotten sun” which, he writes, “melted the wax, causing failure and a screaming fall when Icarus got too close.”¹⁶⁰ The fall of Icarus, once the emblem of tragic pathos, becomes for Bataille the ecstatic shriek of excess as the boy’s body plunges into the sea like so much treasure in the Potlatch.



Figure 35. Andre Masson. Untitled (Automatic Drawing). 1924

Alongside images of the body, Surrealists elaborated their psychoanalytic labyrinth through linear inscription. Automatic drawing provided privileged access to the unconscious that was normally blocked by repression and rationality. These works frequently took the form of labyrinthine loopings as in another Masson work from 1924 (Fig. 35).¹⁶¹ No longer a continent monad, the split-subject of

Surrealism contains within itself the primal monstrosity and libidinal force of the

¹⁵⁹ Georges Bataille, “The Sacred Conspiracy,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 181.

¹⁶⁰ Bataille, “Rotten Sun,” *ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁶¹ Ruskin himself explicitly associates the spiral-form of the labyrinth with a certain distracted automatism and the natural occurrence of the Fibonacci sequence: “Again, the free sweep of a pen at the finish of a large letter has the tendency to throw itself into a spiral. There is no particular intelligence, or spiritual emotion, in the production of this line. A worm draws it with his coil, a fern with his bud, and a periwinkle with his shell.” See Ruskin, p. 461

Minotaur, which follows the automatist thread out of its prison of repression to be unleashed on the world. Surrealist self-discovery works in reverse: a journey *out of* authoritarian regimes of rationality and instrumentality, and *into* the savage dream-space of the Unconscious.

The American heir to the Surrealist labyrinth—and the painter who recodes it in existentialist terms—is Jackson Pollock. In the reception of Pollock’s drip paintings, as Michael Leja has demonstrated, critics routinely made reference to their chaotic anti-pattern as “labyrinth.”¹⁶² Around 1960, Pollock was still frequently read in the terms that Harold Rosenberg had articulated in “American Action Painters,” wherein Rosenberg too invokes the metaphor of the maze. For William Rubin writing in the late fifties, Pollock’s drip paintings could be joined, in a rather reductive fashion, to the automatist practice of Andre Masson, the surrealist for whom the labyrinth topos was most central.¹⁶³ Dore Ashton, Alfred Barr, and Sam Hunter all used the term labyrinth in their writings on Pollock.¹⁶⁴ Parker Tyler, former editor of the New York Surrealist magazine *View*, used the labyrinth as the central metaphor in his baroque piece of criticism “Jackson Pollock: The Infinite Labyrinth.”¹⁶⁵ For Tyler, Pollock’s interwoven skeins trigger a series of mental paradoxes; they look to him like unsolvable mazes, metaphors

¹⁶² Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 308.

¹⁶³ William Rubin, “Notes on Masson and Pollock,” *Arts*, Nov. 1959, pp. 36-43.

¹⁶⁴ Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, p. 308.

¹⁶⁵ cited in *ibid.*, p. 313; originally published in *Magazine of Art*, March 1950.

for modern anxiety, even if they ultimately promise liberation from their mazelike prisons.¹⁶⁶

Pollock also engaged with the topos during his period of psychoanalysis, imbuing his received notions of the surrealist labyrinth with the popular psycho-mythology of Carl Jung. Under the guidance of the analyst John Henderson, Pollock executed a series of automatist drawings as a therapeutic exercise, hoping (naively perhaps) to access his unconscious—here imagined through the Jungian notion of universal archetypes—and to relieve his alcoholism. The Jungian unconscious and its archetypal arrangements are imagined as transhistorical structures, common to all human beings (as opposed to the less mysticist Freudian unconscious, which develops within the specificity of private family interactions). These so-called “psychoanalytic drawings” feature numerous bull-human hybrid Minotaur figures in a style that recalls both Picasso and Masson. Immediately the contradiction in the drawings is clear: even in an attempt to flee history and access mythic archetypes, Pollock’s work is inevitably entrapped in the aesthetic histories that made it possible. Instead of the transcendent collectivity that Jung dreamed about, these drawing communicate only an art-historical dynamic, the Oedipal relation between artistic generations, and the aesthetic processing that certain formations undergo as a young artist works through the legacies of older practitioners. Picasso did, after all, design the first cover of the Surrealist journal *Minotaure*, and the figure proliferates throughout his practice as the embodiment of painterly virility. Pollock’s quest for unmediated access to uncensored unconscious betrays itself—and the Jungian ideology with which it was associated—in a historically and culturally circumscribed visual language.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 316.

If the Minotaur and associated tropes initially provided the dream of a transhistorical matrix through which Pollock hoped to commune with universal commonalities, the drip-technique and its attendant labyrinth developed an abstract language for the radically individualized, tragic yet heroic self of painterly existentialism. I do not intend to uncritically embrace these notions of existential selfhood, but they were clearly at stake for both Pollock and a generation of his critics during the period that Manzoni worked. In the drip paintings, subjective struggle took on a modernist choreography. For commentators in the fifties and sixties, his “dance in the labyrinth” dramatized the existential confrontation of an individual subject with his own selfhood, the irony of course being that the more the inscription declares itself to be wholly his own, the more automatic and anonymous it becomes.¹⁶⁷ Dancing is appropriate here, not only because in 1946 De Kooning had painted a backdrop entitled *Labyrinth* for a dance performance, but also because an alternate version of the classical myth holds that “labyrinth” actually refers to the Princess Ariadne’s dancing ground.

Neither Daedalus, Icarus, nor the Minotaur: at this twilight apex of modernism, the artist embodied the Labyrinth itself. It moved through and with his body in a preverbal ritual that rendered a maze of paint in such a way as to indicate—by its material form—the physicality of the painterly process and the heroic struggle with the unconscious he hoped it might signify.

Note the primacy of *line* in all of these articulations. Ariadne’s thread: the line out; made, laid, and followed by hand. The linear convolutions of automatic drawing that trace the line that leads into the unconscious; or, inversely, the line followed by the unconscious as it erupts out of repression into daily life. And of course Pollock’s skeins,

¹⁶⁷ I use the pronoun advisedly.

whose elongated globular inscriptions are both line and figure simultaneously. Of course, it is hardly coincidental that *skein*, the evocative term for Pollockian drips, is also the name for a twisted bundle of thread. All of these lines are transduced by the mythic hand in an aesthetic delineation of selfhood.

Behaviorist Architecture

In Manzoni's hands, however, the topos of the labyrinth undergoes a clinical revision. The viewer wandering Manzoni's labyrinth is neither the heroic Theseus of Ruskin's classicism nor the Pollockian Man in an existential dance. Manzoni's labyrinth certainly addresses the psyche, but not in the sense of the Surrealist subject, unleashing primal libidinal force, nor even in the sense of the analysand of psychoanalysis, whose psychic conflicts are also framed in the language of classical mythology. Stripped of all romance, invoked in a rejection of classical humanism, the labyrinth for Manzoni interpellates a distinctly *behaviorist* subject. As the participant is goaded along the terrifying path through the maze, his stimulus-response patterns are observed from above, as though he were the subject of a laboratory experiment. The artist explains:

The "subject" is the spectator himself (his mental structure). According to his reactions, he will be automatically guided along one itinerary or another and will be provided with different sensations according to the unconscious choices he makes.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Manzoni, "Placentarium," in Celant 1991, p. 107.

As if to clarify, Manzoni ends the description with the statement that opened this chapter: “At the present moment (1962) I am studying an electronically controlled labyrinth which will be useful for psychological tests and brainwashing.”¹⁶⁹

The central issue in all of the previous topological formulations of the labyrinth was essentially the construction of subjectivity, the challenge of selfhood, or the ordering of identity. What is at stake in Manzoni’s formulation, and what constitutes his radical reversal, is the systematic dismantling of subjectivity, the destruction of the self, and the directed rearrangement of identity. That was, after all, the very project of brainwashing and psychological maze-experiments, linked in the history and practice of behaviorism and its heirs.

One can trace the development of the psychological school known as behaviorism from its origins as a breakaway movement of boldly materialist psychologists to a globally significant understanding of human behavior and its modification in a vast range of institutional spaces. A raft of critical philosophers, from Hannah Arendt in 1958 to Herbert Marcuse in 1964, decried its rise in the strongest of terms.¹⁷⁰ In the mid-1950’s, behaviorism became so central to the understanding of social science that the various branches of the social sciences (anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, and sociology) were often united under the academic umbrella of *behavioral sciences*.¹⁷¹ Behaviorist research came to dominate not only social science laboratories, but also and consequently the social and institutional spaces of everyday life in the twentieth century. The

¹⁶⁹ Manzoni, “Some Realizations,” in Celant 1998, p. 223.

¹⁷⁰ see Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 45, and Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 12.

¹⁷¹ Rebecca Lemov, *World as Laboratory: Experiments with Mice, Mazes, and Men* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), p. 190.

discursive and institutional promiscuity of behaviorism is remarkable: the design of shopping malls, advertisements, hospitals, and, most infamously, the CIA protocols on so-called “soft-torture” all emerged from behaviorist experimentation. To this day, behavioral scientists remain essential components of successful political campaigns.¹⁷²

The maze-form and its variations were of absolute centrality to the experimental (and ultimately ideological) program of the behaviorists. The first published experiment involving a rat in a maze dates to 1901 by a fellow at the Clark Institute named Willard Small; in the study, rats negotiated the winding corridors of a wire-mesh labyrinth based on the plan of Hampton Court Maze to find a food reward.¹⁷³ This kind of apparatus quickly gained popularity in diverse branches of psychological study, but nowhere more so than in an emerging new science founded by Johns Hopkins psychologist John B. Watson. Watson’s writings comprise a veritable encyclopedia of maze-apparatuses and their methodology.¹⁷⁴ In his famous article “Psychology as the Behaviorist Sees It,” sometimes called the manifesto of behaviorism, Watson brashly dismisses both introspection and consciousness as legitimate objects of scientific study. If psychology was to become properly scientific or to take its place among the natural sciences, Watson argued, then it must devote itself to the recording and analysis of observable behaviors rather than the slippery subjectivities of introspection. In the polemical first paragraph,

¹⁷² Benedict Carey, “Academic Dream Team Helped Obama’s Effort,” *The New York Times*, Nov 12 2012, online at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/13/health/dream-team-of-behavioral-scientists-advised-obama-campaign.html?pagewanted=all&src=ISMR_AP_LO_MST_FB

¹⁷³ Dudchenko, Paul A., *Why People Get Lost: The Psychology and Neuroscience of Spatial Cognition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 11-13.

¹⁷⁴ See especially the “Apparatus and Methods” chapter in John B. Watson, *Behavior: An Introduction to Comparative Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company 1914), pp. 56-105.

he writes, “[Behaviorism’s] theoretical goal is the prediction *and control* of behavior...The behaviorist, in his efforts to get a unitary scheme of animal response, recognizes *no dividing line between man and brute*.”¹⁷⁵ Unlike Ruskin’s labyrinth, in which the subject waged an eternal struggle of human virtues with bestial passions, Watson’s maze summarily cancels any difference whatsoever between human and animal. Thus rodent behavior could serve as a direct analog to human behavior, and the rat-maze could become the central experimental and conceptual paradigm of behaviorism. All living organisms within the experimental structure of the maze are reduced to stimulus-response patterns; the subject is conceived as mere data, and furthermore all mental activity is dissolved into bodily action.¹⁷⁶ Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Watson, despite his profound influence on the field, later left experimental psychology to work at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency.

Behaviorism begins by reducing of the self to its observable bodily behaviors, but as the science developed, it experimented more and more with the possibility of dismantling subjectivity altogether, or even re-engineering the subject to desired specifications. Rodent and human subjects alike were administered electric shocks and other traumatizing operations in order to induce a state of psychological and behavioral pliability. Stunned into submission by physical pain, but more effectively by the threat of

¹⁷⁵ John Watson, “Psychology as the Behaviorist Sees It,” reprinted in *Psychological Review*, Vol. 101, No. 2, 1994, p. 248; originally published in *Psychological Review*, 20, 1913: 158-177 (italics mine).

¹⁷⁶ Watson’s experimental subject also recalls Adorno and Horkheimer’s spectator in “The Culture Industry” chapter of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “The spectator must need no thoughts of his own: the product prescribes each action...through signals. Any logical connection presupposing mental activity is scrupulously avoided.” See Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 109.

its return, subjects were rendered psychologically defenseless.¹⁷⁷ Behaviorists even found that certain protocols of physical and mental shock could induce not just passivity but psychological regression in the experimental subject. If rats and people could become as vacant and docile as babies, then perhaps their entire psyche could be re-written, the self wiped clean, as it were.¹⁷⁸ Regression to neonatal passivity turns out to be a major goal of the Placentarium, too. In a letter to Otto Piene introducing the Placentarium project, Manzoni writes that within the many variations of the structure of the theater, the spectator is maintained always in a “fetal situation.”¹⁷⁹

Brainwashing had erupted onto the international scene after the experiences of American GI's in Chinese reeducation camps during the Korean War, inspiring popular hysteria, an Oscar-winning film, and scores of covert CIA-funded experiments to study its techniques. Despite authoritative dismissals of the practice as a myth, the word quickly gained international recognition. It entered the Italian lexicon as *lavare il cervello*, the same phrase that Manzoni uses, in 1957.¹⁸⁰

The radicality of Manzoni's citation of behaviorist brainwashing in the context of the Labyrinth can be clarified by comparing it to contemporary European installations of the same name. The Situationist labyrinth, for instance, was intended to provide the conditions for a ‘constructed situation,’ the title Debord and his cohort gave to strategies

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Lemov, *World as Laboratory*, p. 88, pp. 190-203.

¹⁷⁸ Hence the widespread secret brainwashing experiments financed by the CIA (to this day not quite infamous enough to cause scandal) which developed brainwashing and torture techniques subsequently used on political dissidents in Latin and South America in the 1980's and then on 21st century “detainees” at US black sites, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo. Cf. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, (New York: Picador, 2007).

¹⁷⁹ Celant 2004, p. 263

¹⁸⁰ Zancani, “Italian-American Linguistic Borrowings,” p. 182.

of collective play that could theoretically combat the alienating effects of capitalist existence. Their proposed installation at the Stedelijk Museum would have involved an obstacle course followed by a tunnel lined with Pinot-Gallizio's industrial paintings. GRAV's *Labyrinth*, a project that was realized in 1963, was even more optimistic about the potential of participatory spectatorship to enhance the freedom of the viewing subject. As they wrote in the manifesto that accompanied the installation, GRAV wanted to produce "a viewer conscious of his power of action, and tired of so many abuses and mystifications, [who] will be able to make his own 'revolution in art.'"¹⁸¹ Although these projects differ in their theoretical orientation and in their scope, GRAV's goal being revolution in art and the SI's being a global political and cultural revolution, they both hope to achieve some victory against passivity and against alienation in an interactive framework that explores new possibilities of selfhood.

In marked contrast, Manzoni's brainwashing Labyrinth would break apart the subject through an aggressive, traumatizing experimental program very much like the behaviorist maze-experiments that gave rise to Western brainwashing techniques. If the labyrinth had served, in previous generations and in a variety of ways, to express the mystery and difficulty of the human self, for Manzoni the labyrinth interpellates a subject whose psychic structure can be scientistically known so totally that it can be dismantled and re-engineered at will. If the labyrinth served for contemporary artists as the name of new possibilities in the mutual constitution of art and self, for Manzoni it names only a positivist nightmare of political and scientific manipulation.

¹⁸¹ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 89.

Daedalic Dactylographs

The twisting passages of the labyrinth have frequently been associated with a part of the body. For Derrida, as for Nietzsche, it is the ear. For Bataille, the coils of the gut. For Manzoni, however, the labyrinth is nowhere else but the papillary ridges of the finger. The favorite finger in Manzoni's case is the right thumb, appearing as it does more than any other in his works (Fig. 36). In Galton's system of categorization, Manzoni's right thumbprint is neither an arch, nor tent, nor loop. It is in fact a "whorl," the name also for convolutions, coiling things, or the spiral hollows of a snail shell. Although the arch and the loop also bear more than passing resemblance to mazes, the whorl is the most labyrinthine of the fingerprint-types. This daedalic stamp, inked on paper then enlarged and reprinted on a placard or in the *8 Tables of Assessment*, mimics the aerial views of the labyrinth on the ancient Cretan coins that Ruskin reproduced in the *Fors*: a linear spiral winding ever inward toward a central chamber.

Thus the linear convolutions of the daedalic architecture leads us back again to thumbprints—not those left by little Icarus in the wax-made wings, but to Manzoni's own. From thumbprint to egg to Placentarium to Labyrinth to thumbprint. Like wanderers in a maze, we find ourselves back again where we started. The logic of Manzoni's practice wends back into itself, spiraling inward like the whorl of his dactylograph. The Labyrinth is, of course, like the Panopticon and the Placentarium, a carceral structure, a prison designed for the Minotaur but where, in time, the architect himself becomes immured. It is, in fact, the ur-prison, the mythic emblem of the carceral

order, and thus it is fitting that it might be brought into association with the techniques of police science.

Daedalion is the word for structures like those made by Daedalus, miraculous in their complexity and craft. For Manzoni, the daedalion serves as the modern body's perfect figure. For a daedalion is not only a tortuous, labyrinthine, linear structure; it is also—and this is of equal emphasis—a work of stunning ingenuity and complex artifice. In short, it is a work of human production. Under the spiraling daedalion of Manzoni's thumbprint, the whorl-form which writes the body into the police dossier even as it invokes the ultimate prison, the “natural” body is revealed to be a cultural product. It is a metamorphosis worthy of Ovid himself.

And who is this artist who constructs labyrinths and living sculptures? In such light, Manzoni assumes the guise of a modern Daedalus, mythic architect of the Labyrinth, who was likewise credited with contriving military robots and statues that seemed to move.¹⁸² Ruskin may have wanted to be the heroic Theseus, just as Klein longed to emulate the tragic Icarus, but Manzoni identifies instead with the flying boy's crafty father. Daedalus, like Odysseus, was endowed with *metis*, a form of intelligence defined as both cunning and technical skill.¹⁸³ Manzoni is surely a trickster, but in the latter aspect of *metis*, Manzoni's emulation of Daedalus is deeply ironic, since his engagement with skill was often enough to dismantle it. His adoption of the fingerprint in 1960 collapses both poles of the comparison, since it represents the manifest debasement of skilled authorial gesture, while simultaneously evoking the *daedalion* in

¹⁸² Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 175.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

the swirling vortex of its linear circumvolutions. This de-skilled Daedalus finds the labyrinth quite literally at his fingertips—a readymade daedalion. But the thumbprint labyrinth is not only the ironic de/feat of technical prowess, it is also a trap: an infinitude of lines, ducts, and passages from which there is no escape. When Manzoni impresses his dactylograph, he casts himself as the arrested criminal. The inked finger testifies to this: like that other Daedalus, the labyrinth-builder has become the prisoner.



Figure 36. Piero Manzoni. Impronta pollice destra. 1960

Chapter Two: Readymade Reification: Manzoni's Magic Base and Other Works



Figure 37. Manzoni. Base Magica (Magic Base). 1961

By itself, the *Magic Base* (1961) stands as a work of radical incompleteness: a sculptural base with no sculpture (Fig. 37). Both site and protocol, the piece offers absence as an invitation. Step right up, it seems to say, and complete this image of a sculpture. Like a form to be filled-in, it is the blank space that activates the project, a field waiting to be occupied. It is precisely this kind of work that Umberto Eco would hail just one year later as “the open work,” part of a new international trend in art, music, and other aesthetic forms in which the viewer or performer is activated as a participant. The open work declares a new receptive mode, Eco argues, inaugurating not only “a new chapter in the history of art,” but also “a new cycle of relations between the artist and his

audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception.”¹⁸⁴ It is true that in the visual arts, the Magic Base is one of an array of works beginning in the late fifties and continuing for the following decade, from Happenings to *dérives* to Fluxus Boxes, that proposed newly complex modes of viewer participation. These modes of interactive reception would come to be celebrated for their collectivity, their resistance to passivity, and for the possibility of a liberatory cultural practice. Later writers would even call them democratic. The practitioners who developed these new modes do so almost universally in the spirit of enhancing the freedom of the spectator, and they frequently make reference to art’s de-alienating capabilities.

But the Magic Base? What kind of participation does it invite, and what kind of subjectivity would such participation constitute?

The work is open, to be sure. The first Magic Base is defined by its openness, by an open space, in fact, on its top surface, extending its invitation in the form of two silhouetted footprints. Similar footprints would mark the surface of Warhol’s horizontal painting *Dance Diagram* one year later, but Manzoni’s citation of readymade footholds actually welcomes the viewer literally to stand on the surface of this sculpture, years before Carl Andre would do the same. The Base thrives on a relation of dependence; it requires us as viewer-participants to offer ourselves as possible completions. In this participatory dependency, the work remains open to contextual contingencies, a nominalist machine whose raw materials change with time and place. Without an active spectator the work of art is left unfinished, the signifying chain left broken, the empty pedestal out-of-place and incomplete. In a sense, an empty Base is the physical form of

¹⁸⁴ Umberto Eco, “The Poetics of the Open Work,” reprinted in *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 39.

the dangling modifier. Therefore this, like other interactive works of art, might be supposed to generate a collaborative practice, to energize the subjectivity of its participant in the production of the work of art, or to make an aesthetic recipient into a discursive partner.

But what happens to the body on top of the Magic Base? Isolated, immobilized, and determined from without, the base frames the body like a sculpture; that is, like an object, a thing. The Base revises the Duchampian readymade in its performative capacity, the gesture of declaration that christens an everyday object—a bottlerack, a urinal—as a work of art. A christening craze was currently underway among Manzoni’s contemporaries, from Yves Klein signing the sky to Ben Vautier signing most anything conceivable, including Manzoni’s own death in 1963. But the Base and the group of Manzoni works associated with it address readymade performativity to the human body specifically, thereby constituting the subject of participation in a rhetoric of reification. In plucking a mass-produced object out of daily life, the Duchampian readymade is predicated upon the commodity-form and its relationship to the art institution. In making the human body into a readymade, Manzoni makes avant-garde practice itself into an engine of human commodification. This discursive violence is left unsublimated, unredeemed, a naked commodification of the subject. Emancipation this is not.

This chapter is about a group of works from 1961 that center around the *Magic Base*, beginning with the first *Living Sculptures* performance in January, running through the *Certificates of Authenticity*, and expanding to the *Socle du monde* in October. These works build upon one another to link the readymade and participation in an aggressive practice of reification. They do so in a process similar to what Hal Foster has called

“mimetic exacerbation,” the amplification of capitalist dehumanization in works of art.¹⁸⁵

In defiance of a host of his contemporaries, Manzoni’s works do not devise alternatives to the alienation of advanced capitalism, nor do they indulge in the myth of material transcendence. Conceived in a spirit of profound pessimism, this group of works casts a skeptical eye on the liberatory claims of even the most advanced artistic practice of its day. If these works articulate a critique, it is voiced exclusively in the negative.

The Living Sculptures: Misogyny, Myth, and Materialism

On January 13, 1961, Manzoni gathered two women, a film crew, and a photographer in a Milan film studio to sign his first Living Sculptures into existence. Stills and studio photographs of the event show the women, partially nude, standing on pedestals and contorted into the poses of classical sculpture, complete with decorous drapery.¹⁸⁶ Smirking impishly, an exuberant Manzoni signs and dates various parts of the body—the small of the back, the torso—as the photographers record the event (Fig. 38). In the photographs, the women do not smile, charged as they are with aping staid classicism. As living, breathing stand-ins for figural sculpture, the women become the objects of their own mimesis. Although the Living Sculpture series would exceed the technique, it is nude (or mostly-nude) women in the postures of classical statuary that define its first and most overtly spectacularized phase. Manzoni would again exhibit nude women as Living Sculpture at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome in April of 1961,

¹⁸⁵ Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 191.

¹⁸⁶ Piero Manzoni, *Piero Manzoni: Paintings, Reliefs, and Objects* (London: Tate Gallery, 1974), p. 67.

and that same year he wrote to a gallerist of his desire to exhibit one hundred naked women signed as works of art.¹⁸⁷



Figure 38. Piero Manzoni. Living Sculpture. 1961



Figure 39. Piero Manzoni. Corpo d'aria newsreel. Filmgiornale SEDI. 1960.

¹⁸⁷ Celant 2009, p. 245; Manzoni wrote to Addi K pke, “I would like to exhibit a hundred naked and autographed women at Copenhagen Opera Theater. Can you find women and theater?”

This was not the first time a woman had been recruited for a Manzoni spectacle. The female body and its representation had also made a surprise appearance in an earlier newsreel, *Filmgiornale SEDI 1020*, in which Manzoni demonstrated the *Corpo d'aria* alongside the model Lucie D'Albert (Fig. 39). As Manzoni blows up balloons in a modish Milanese interior, the film's voiceover suggests that the pneumatic sculpture is actually a portrait of D'Albert. The narrator draws mocking attention to the likewise pneumatic aspects of Ms. D'Albert's body: "Now, to be fair, the model is swollen in parts it is true, but recognizing her in the balloon, come on...but he, unperturbed, blows and inflates, and puffs." The final shot of the segment compares two *Corpo d'aria*, one spherical, the other ovoid on matching black stands. In a closeup of the sphere, the voiceover declares, "Here she is: you will not recognize her, but it is the model from earlier." The camera cuts to the ovoid. "And this," the narrator continues "her thinner sister."¹⁸⁸ Thus art's classicizing obsession with the female form, brought into the eye of spectacle, turns advanced artistic practice into a sham of failed mimesis in which the female body is assessed as an object of scopophilic gratification.

It is no accident that the bodies on display are female. Considering the stark gendering of the division of labor in the first *Living Sculptures*, it is remarkable how infrequently the category of gender appears in the scholarly literature on these works. Surprisingly or not, there are numerous precedents for nude or semi-clothed female performers in avant-garde spectacles. Surrealist exhibitions, for example, had frequently made use of female bodies. In the 1938 Surrealism exhibition in Paris, for example, an

¹⁸⁸ Quoted in Gregory Tentler, "Without Expensive Transport or the Bother of Customs: Piero Manzoni and the Postwar Avant-Garde 1956-1963," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2010, p. 257; from transcript of *Filmgiornale Sedi 1020* reprinted in Enzo Rossi-Ròiss *Dossier Piero Manzoni (tomo primo)*.

actress performed “The Unconsummated Act.” In the throes of “hysteria,” she rolled around on the floor with a live rooster and flung her body wildly about on a set of beds.¹⁸⁹ In the “Hall of Superstitions” at the 1947 Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme, a model wearing nothing but Duchamp’s *Prière de toucher* over her crotch posed next to Fredrick Kiesler’s *Totem of All Religions*.¹⁹⁰ Moreover, as women begin to appear with greater frequency in various art performances at the turn of the sixties, issues of gender, sexuality, and exploitation become especially relevant.

The first Living Sculptures and the Corpo d’aria newsreel are of a piece with a number of contemporaneous works in which women, often nude or semi-clothed, were instrumentalized in the execution of neo-avantgarde art spectacles. Women participated in American Happenings, for example, frequently in states of undress. Kaprow writes of “a nude girl” running after a spotlight and throwing spinach.¹⁹¹ Susan Sontag, at an untitled Happening in 1962, describes a naked woman draped across a ladder dangling above the performance space. Sontag calls this tendency “a person being used as a still life,” part of a larger trend in Happenings to treat people as objects.¹⁹²

But in European performances of the late 50’s and 60’s, women’s bodies appear especially central. The *piece de resistance* at the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme in 1959 was Meret Oppenheim’s enduringly shocking *Cannibal Feast*, a

¹⁸⁹ Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938-1968* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005), pp. 52-54.

¹⁹⁰ Taylor, *Étant donnés*, p. 70.

¹⁹¹ Allan Kaprow, “Happenings in the New York Scene,” reprinted in Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 15; originally published in *Art News* 60 (1961): 36–39, 58–62.

¹⁹² Susan Sontag, “Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961), p. 267.

participatory performance in which a nude female model was lain out on a table and covered with food. The woman was *administered a sedative*, and then the surrealists ate the buffet off her prone, semiconscious body.¹⁹³

In Italy, a specially-attired model served as the centerpiece of Giuseppe Pinot-Galizzio's *Cavern of Anti-Matter* in 1959. The Situationist artist transformed the white cube of a gallery space into a dank, dark, cavelike installation by draping the walls, floor, and ceiling with his pigment-encrusted industrial paintings. Faint echoes of horselike forms on the walls recalled paleolithic cave paintings in this space, which the artist himself called "the uterus of the world," and thus a return to origins is measured in both prehistoric and gestational temporalities.¹⁹⁴

The fantasmatic primitivism enacted in the Cavern is nowhere more evident than in its sole indigenous inhabitant, a blonde female model dressed in high heels and a gown of the same paint-daubed canvas as the walls. Her role, as explained on an exhibition invitation, was to represent the collision between the "anti-matter" of the ceiling and the "matter" of the ground. She is there both to decorate the space, to provide a kernel of heterosexual eroticism within the womb-tomb, and to allegorize the "provisional reality" that Gallizio wished to project into a situationist future. Here, then, is another of modernism's repressed terms: the allegorical female body, against which generations of

¹⁹³ Mahon, *Politics of Eros*, pp.166-167; also Taylor, *Étant donnés*, p. 103. Jasper Johns' *Target With Plaster Casts* hung directly over the woman's drugged body.

¹⁹⁴ Frances Stracey, "The Caves of Gallizio and Hirschhorn: Excavations of the Present," *October* 116 (Spring 2006), p. 93; although Stracey has defended the Cavern as a critique of the disciplinary rationality in Corbusian modernism, it is impossible to ignore the installation's primitivizing retrogression or the fantasy of atavistic return it evokes. As Stracey herself acknowledges, the Cavern represents modernism's imagined other, the return of the repressed within the white gallery walls, which, in its prehistoric play, runs the risk of fêting the imagined idyll of a pre-modern past.

modernist painters, from Manet to Cezanne to Picasso, had organized key aspects of their practice.¹⁹⁵ In positioning itself against the coldly rationalist sterility of Corbusian architecture, the cavern must speak of itself in the feminine, as a womb, as a prelinguistic past, as an allegorical vessel, as a receptive body. The patriarchal binaries proliferate in this way, through and around the model and her uterine abode.

If the academic allegory had typically been nude, however, the dress and heels on Gallizio's model signal the presence of fashion and advertising culture. A photograph from the exhibition shows the woman beaming at the camera as she gestures to the wall like a model in a showroom. By reproducing the aesthetic instrumentalization of women's bodies that has attended all phases of capitalist development—from bourgeois academic paintings to the pages of consumerist magazines—the *dérive* in the cavern leads inescapably to affirmation. Her instrumentality gives the lie to the critical pretensions of the installation.

The Paris Happenings of Jean-Jacques Lebel, an early friend of Manzoni's, featured live women in central roles whose sexualized exuberance make Pinot-Gallizio look tame by comparison. In the Happenings *To Exorcise a Spirit of Catastrophe* (1962) and especially *120 Minutes Dedicated to the Divine Marquis* (1965), nudity and overt sexuality served a deliberately transgressive function, scandalizing the audience in a raucous theater of desublimation. Naked women were publicly spanked in the rhythm of 'La Marseillaise,' and Shirley Goldfarb's nude body was covered in whipped-cream,

¹⁹⁵ As if to underscore the connection, Carolee Schneeman will appear as Manet's *Olympia* in a 1965 performance of Robert Morris' *Site*. Cf. Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 82.

which Lebel invited viewers to lick off.¹⁹⁶ Despite his hopes for an atmosphere of desublimatory liberation, Lebel's understanding of Happenings is hampered by all the weariest clichés of primitivism (prehistoric cultures, "Negro art," children, shamans, madmen, and of course criminals). In this litany of primitivist otherings, the sexual exploitation of women holds pride of place. *Transmutation* is the principal role Lebel assigns to art, and "all transmutation," he claims, "begins with rape."¹⁹⁷

The most immediate precedent for the Living Sculptures, however, is a performance by Yves Klein. On March 9, 1960, Klein and three female models demonstrated the production of *Anthropometries of the Blue Period* before a live audience and a film crew at the Galerie Internationale d'Art Contemporain in Paris.¹⁹⁸ The models were nude, but Klein, like the audience, was dressed in formalwear. He conducts himself throughout the performance with an air of utter seriousness. To the accompaniment of a small orchestra playing Klein's "Monotone Symphony," the women enter carrying paint cans, and soon set to work smearing themselves in blue paint from the breasts down. The women drag each other horizontally across the ground as one model, in sunglasses, lies down in a puddle of paint. Klein directs them with either whispered instructions or an indicating gesture as they impress their pigmented bodies to a large canvas backdrop, thus becoming "Living Brushes," the human instruments for the production of the *Anthropometries* paintings (Fig. 40).

¹⁹⁶ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 99.

¹⁹⁷ Jean-Jacques Lebel, "On the Necessity of Violation," in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 270.

¹⁹⁸ *Yves Klein 1928-1962: A Retrospective* (Houston: Rice University, 1982), p. 198.



Figure 40. Yves Klein. Anthropometries of the Blue Period. Performance. 1960

It is not my intention to make the rather obvious point that these works of art objectify women (although the extreme patriarchalism and occasional misogyny that underpins a great deal of avant-garde practice, particularly in its complicity with spectacle culture, warrants continued emphasis). What I want to suggest is that these gendered bodies, thus objectified, constellate differing relationships to a tradition of corporeal transcendence, the classical body, and their attendant idealist mythologies.

If the patriarchal legacy of western painting had employed the brush to sublimate desire into pigment, in Klein's performance, the elements of heterosexist painterly sublimation put on a show for the camera. Spattered in fluids and oriented to the bestial horizontal axis, female bodies enact the baseness of sexual drives. Wallowing in muddy puddles of pigment, the women must sacrifice bipedal rectitude to the desublimated splendor of horizontality. But then, under the watchful eye and instructing hand of the supervising (male) artist, they stand again, ascending a platform to approach the sublimating verticality of the canvas. Impressing their soaked bodies against the surface, these women leave lyrical impressions soaring through the white space as if in flight.

With its sublimely floating figuration, the canvas redeems the debasement of the body through its miraculous evanescence as an image. In this stagecraft of dematerialization, all that is body melts into air.

The artist, however, must remain always at a safe distance. Clad in bourgeois formality, Klein commands the unruly bodies toward their purpose, their apotheosis as instruments of their own representation. Klein explains,

...it was flesh itself that applied paint to the canvas, under my direction, with a perfect precision, allowing me to remain constantly at an exact distance “x” from my canvas and thus to continue to dominate my creation during the entire execution.

That way my hands stayed clean, and I no longer dirtied myself with paint, not even the tips of my fingers.¹⁹⁹

And again in the “Chelsea Hotel Manifesto:”

Personally, never would I attempt to smear paint over my own body and become a living brush; but on the contrary, I would rather put on my tuxedo and wear white gloves. I would not even think of dirtying my hands with paint. Detached and distant, the work of art must complete itself before my eyes under my command.”²⁰⁰

In a remarkably economic consolidation of a range of misogynist clichés, actual women manifest the materiality, erotics, labor, and horizontality that define the imagined other of Klein’s masculinist sublimity. Whereas Klein must retain the dignity of verticality, the women must descend to the floor, horizontal like beasts, until they are commanded to rise. In this way the patriarchal artist can play both the instigator of debasement and heroic savior to these women. Theirs is a feminine labor of the body, messy and jiggling, whereas Klein’s is an exercise of the masculine mind, disciplined and restrained. In the

¹⁹⁹ Klein “Truth Becomes Reality,” in *Overcoming the Problematics of Art*, p. 186.

²⁰⁰ Klein, “The Chelsea Hotel Manifesto,” in *ibid.*, p. 197.

clearest of terms, Klein articulates a patriarchal separation of mind and body at the heart of the Living Brushes project. Female flesh is consigned to filth, dirtied with paint as with sexuality, as the male mind controls from an ascetic and algebraically precise distance x .²⁰¹

Klein's process is predicated on absolute separation. The women execute the labor of the painting's production: they work the means of production even as they embody the apparatus of production. Klein observes, directs, and controls this apparatus, this human capital, finally to claim individual authorship/ownership of the collectively manufactured product.²⁰² The division of labor is so total, however, that the painter must profess never to have made physical contact with his laborers or their productive apparatus (which in this case coincide in the women's bodies). Apart from the gentlest guiding touch, Klein must maintain a distance from the work and from the "flesh" that performs it. His is a mental labor entirely. Like a private paragone, Klein's spectacle of production imagines the role of the painter to exist solely in a dominating will-to-painting, the masculinist mind which commands flesh into productive instrumentality in the name of creative transcendence.

The Platonic tradition of mind/body distinction has always carried within itself the philosophical basis for structural hierarchies, particularly of gender. Judith Butler

²⁰¹ We might pause here to remember Linda Nochlin's description of a Gêrome painting of an artist at work. The depicted presence of the nude female model, untouched by the artist, provides the viewer not only with an erotic charge, but also, writes Nochlin, "with a sense of power, however fleeting, through identification with the all-powerful artist in the painting, who at once exercises complete control and admirable restraint in his dealings with an unclothed woman." Linda Nochlin, "Body Politics: Seurat's *Poseuses*," *Art in America* (March 1994), p. 74.

²⁰² For Klein's identification with the bourgeois owner or collector, see Thierry de Duve's "Yves Klein, or The Dead Dealer" in *Sewn in the Sweatshops of Marx: Beuys, Warhol, Klein, Duchamp* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 37-58.

names Descartes, Husserl and Sartre among the heirs of this bequest, and it is perhaps the idealist metaphysical orientation of Klein's practice that founds his peculiar disavowal of the body, especially his own one, and especially in the manipulation of bodies marked as female. "The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well-documented within the field of philosophy and feminism," Butler reminds us, "The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally *entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether*."²⁰³ This passage of Butler's rather neatly describes the mind/body distinction that underwrites the fantasies of transcendent disembodiment in Klein's practice. The same hierarchy of soul/mind over body that inspires Icarian conquests also enshrines a particular discourse of women's bodies that had historically characterized classical representations of women, most notably the nude. In this way Klein can direct the blue-smeared bodies of naked female models and pretend to levitate, all in the service of maintaining continuity (more or less covert) with the authority of a classical tradition. Klein affirms, "Under no circumstances do I consider myself an artist of the avant-garde. I insist on making clear that, on the contrary, I think and believe myself to be a classical artist, perhaps even one of the rare classics of this century!"²⁰⁴

Manzoni, on the other hand, proffers neither ascetic remove nor redemptive transcendence. His grin menacing, Manzoni takes a pen and writes directly onto the women's skin. Literally inscribing the name of the author onto female flesh, the act is an ostentatious exercise of violation that is at once discursive and physical. It is as though

²⁰³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1990), p. 12; italics mine.

²⁰⁴ Klein, *Overcoming the Problematics of Art*, p. 67.

the patriarchal order that underwrites discourses of classicism and authorship had momentarily forgotten to disguise the horror of its violence.

Though certainly no less misogynist in their initial moment, the *Living Sculptures* target classical continuity and its structures directly; they perform a travesty of figurative sculpture and all the idealist abstractions it perpetrates upon the body. The artist who often expressed his desire to make sculptures come uncannily to life, the age-old dream of the moving statue, now effects a complementary operation: living bodies frozen into sculpture. In an Ovidian twist, Manzoni inverts the Pygmalion myth by putting Galatea in reverse; the goddess has backed up out of dynamic life to freeze under the hand of the male artist. Inscribed physically with the name-of-the-author, the woman's body undergoes instant reification. She transforms into an object. Unlike in Klein's performance, the women of the Living Sculptures never emerge from their debasement, but are locked—for life, or so the certificates claim—into their status as mere *objets*. Become thinglike, the body is unable to fulfill the fantasy of transcendence that Klein's *Anthropometries* celebrate. The question of utility arises here, of bridges and ends: the instrumentality of the human tool versus the mock-autonomy of the human sculpture. The plucking of a utilitarian object out of the realm of utility was, after all, one of the founding justifications for Duchamp's readymade. Whereas Klein's models become instruments of their own dematerialization as an image, Manzoni's models are consigned to objecthood under the performative operation of the readymade. Their metamorphosis terminates in naked reification.

If the Living Brushes smuggle classical hierarchies and patriarchal continuities into the nascent performance practice of the neo-avantgarde, then the Living Sculptures

trash classical sculpture in a critique of the transcendental or otherwise liberatory pretensions of neo-avantgarde operations. As a human subject is shown to be all material, all body, the artist is brought into unseemly physical contact with the flesh. There is no redemptive image to disavow corporeal conditions, no floating sublimity to rescue the self from its material fate. Leaving his mark in the form of a manual autograph, Manzoni collapses the mythic distance between the male artist and his female model even as he maintains phallogocentric power disparity. The latent eroticism of the classical nude is made manifest in a spectacle of smirking scopophilia, just as the trace of the hand across the body undermines ascetic remove.

It is important, in this connection, to specify the historicity of gender within the genre of the nude. The classical body for a neoclassical artist like Canova, for example, is a male one, an erect muscularity that harkens back to Periklean *euandria*. But the body of Manzoni's sculpture is female, at least at first, and always when nude. In this way a switch has taken place, a double substitution. What once was male is now female, what once was clothed is now naked. For Canova as for Polykleitos, the male sculpture is properly nude, the female properly clothed. Despite the proliferation of nude female allegorical figures in the late 18th century, the "academic nude" required of students at the Academy des Beaux-Arts remained the classical male, and a great deal of writing has emerged about the homoerotics of reciprocal posing within all-male studios like David's. But Linda Nochlin has drawn our attention to the gender substitution that occurred, somewhat surreptitiously, in the history of the nude at the advent of the 19th century. The nude, assumed to be male from time immemorial, and whose claim to an ancient past and therefore to a reach beyond history was predicated precisely upon the continuity of its

ideal and naked maleness, all of a sudden transforms into a woman. This shift is all the more significant for having been historically dissimulated: everyone proceeded as if nothing had changed. The nude body that will fascinate the artists we call modern is invariably a female one; this became a fact universally acknowledged, an obviousness of obviousnesses.

At one time, it was the male body that should be laid bare, in its ideal perfection, to stand for all of humankind, and it was the female body, that secondary thing, that should remain covered.²⁰⁵ The exposure of a woman's body in her nakedness would have constituted a scandal. Within the modern era, Nochlin contends, these positions were reversed: the nude female body came to stand for all sorts of universal values, whereas the male body receded into sartorial envelopes. Even when male nudes were executed in plaster or bronze, they were far more likely than their female consorts to sport some minimal loin-girding: the fig leaf, for instance, or the strategically-placed drapery.

The reasons and effects of this shift are manifold. It comports with the increased policing of male-on-male homosociality that Foucault observes during the same period. It speaks to the hegemony of the male gaze and its particular force within capitalist social relations. It swathes the nude woman in tropisms of truth and beauty which impute to their presumed-male spectators the ascetic restraint required of bourgeois cultural acolytes, while simultaneously providing these same viewers with substitutive erotic gratification. It instrumentalizes women's bodies through a rhetoric of naturalization that

²⁰⁵ The logic of this difference would correspond to Monique Wittig's feminism. She argues that patriarchy posits maleness as a general and universalizable condition, relegating femaleness to the secondary condition of specificity, of particularized difference from the universal male. Cf. Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993).

obscures its own historicity or the class-gender interests at work within it. It is not by accident that Manet's most famous nude, the work of art that has stood at and for the beginning of Modernism, is a female body for sale.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Manzoni's nudes are female, and that their inscription with the name of the author writes them into an archive of property. The Living Sculptures are "beautiful girls," whose suitability for display is predicated upon their gender, an aspect of the work so overwhelmingly obvious that it went without saying in the patriarchal culture of postwar Italy. It is important, however, that even as Manzoni's gendered nude constellates a relationship to the parade of modern nudes that came before it, the Living Sculptures are executed not within bourgeois social relations that are sometimes synonymous with the term modernity, but rather within an emergent field of spectacularized social relations which, to complete the parallelism, we might with some hesitation call post-modern.

It is important to insist here that Manzoni is far from feminist. Even if he smashes the figural tradition of the nude through which patriarchal forms of aesthetic praxis had historically constituted themselves, he does so in an overt act of violence. This violence is committed directly onto the bodies of two living women in a film studio, stripped and paraded as objects of voyeurism. Their subjectivity is elided in a totalizing objectification. Though frequently critical in its negativity, Manzoni's work is just as often cruel and debasing.

But even within the specificity of these first, gendered Living Sculptures, the terms that will guide the larger series of works are set. The fact that Manzoni signed people for the first time in a film studio, in front of a pair of cameras, places spectacle

culture at the heart of the project. The works that follow the Living Sculptures, in elaboration of their operations, will also address the shared reification of the body and the subject. Although the project begins with women's bodies, it does not end with them. The readymade reification that defines the first forays into Living Sculpture will come to administer a range of bodies, male and female, clothed and unclothed, animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman. This series of works will also interrogate the limits of the readymade, particularly in its relation to the author-function and the art institution. And in rather unexpected fashion, the classical body and its disintegration will recur throughout.

Certificates of Authenticity: "Morbid Scission"

The consummation of the division of labor within the individual, his radical objectification, leads to his morbid scission.

*Theodor Adorno*²⁰⁶

Manzoni did not restrict his signature to naked women, nor was the signature itself the sole gesture of appropriation. For every *Living Sculpture*, Manzoni also issued a *Certificate of Authenticity*, a system of tickets and stamps that certified the person as a genuine Manzoni. The certificates come in the form of little booklets with orange covers, about the size of a checkbook. Manzoni had several of these booklets printed at the printshop of Antonio Maschera in Milan, hundreds of certificates in all. The recto of each certificate is printed in French, the verso in English. It reads:

²⁰⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), p.231.

Declaration of Authenticity No. 001

This is to certify that [name] has been signed by my hand and therefore is to be considered as an authentic work of art for all intents and purposes as of the date below.

On the dotted lines at the bottom, there are spaces for location, date, and of course Manzoni's signature (Fig. 41).

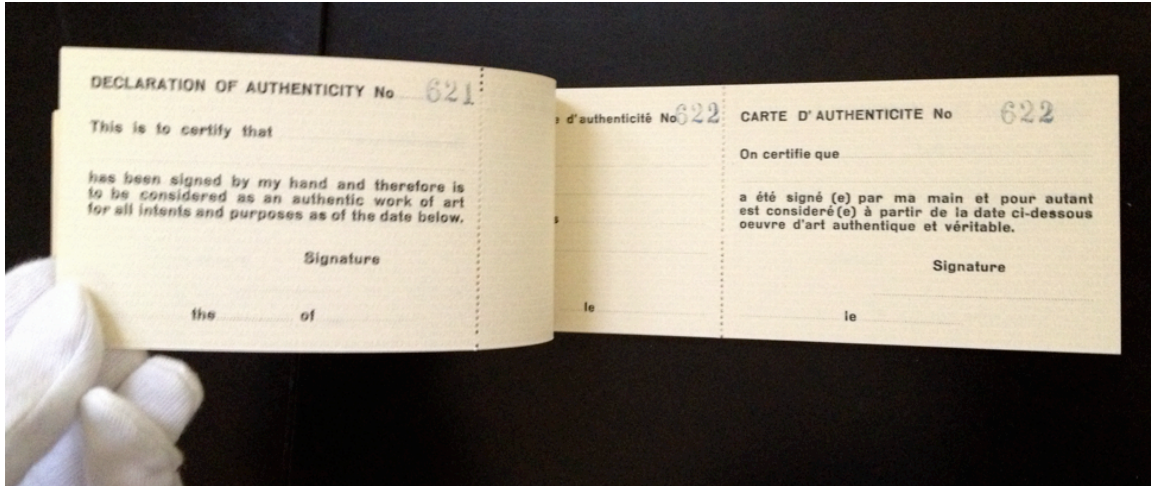


Figure 41. Piero Manzoni. Certificates of Authenticity (unused booklet). 1961

Across a perforated line to the left of each certificate there is a stub. After filling out the form, the artist would tear off the certificate to bestow it upon the appropriate Living Sculpture, and the artist would retain these booklets of stubs as records (Fig. 42). The used booklets therefore form a sort of truncated archive of transactions, again not unlike a checkbook. Each stub also features a printed form that Manzoni filled out by hand, but these are only in French, as the verso is blank. It repeats the number of the certificate, the name of the person signed, the city and date of the occurrence. It also has a small section for notes.

But before tearing apart certificate and stub, Manzoni would place neatly across the line of perforation a color-coded stamp. That way when the paper is torn, both

certificate and stub each bear part of a stamp. Most of the stamps are red, designating the person's entire body a work of art for life. Other colors, however, could designate specific conditions. They could name only a certain body-part as the work of art, for example, like an arm or a foot. The duration of the work was likewise variable, since the certificates could specify that they were valid only for a given period of time or under certain conditions, like when the person was "drinking or singing," for example.²⁰⁷ In short, the color-coding of the stamps works like this: a red stamp meant the person existed as a work of art until death; yellow meant only the signed body-part was a work of art; green meant the person was a work of art only in a certain pose or when performing certain functions specified on the certificate; purple functioned like the red stamps, but for a fee.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ The quotation (and the standard system for the color-coding) are taken from an article by Manzoni's friend Antonio Caputo published in *Pensiero Nazionale* in May 1961, with information likely from Manzoni himself; the article is also reprinted in Celant 2004, p. 274.

²⁰⁸ Battino and Palazzoli, p. 116; Manzoni also produced grey stamps, whose potential function remains obscure.

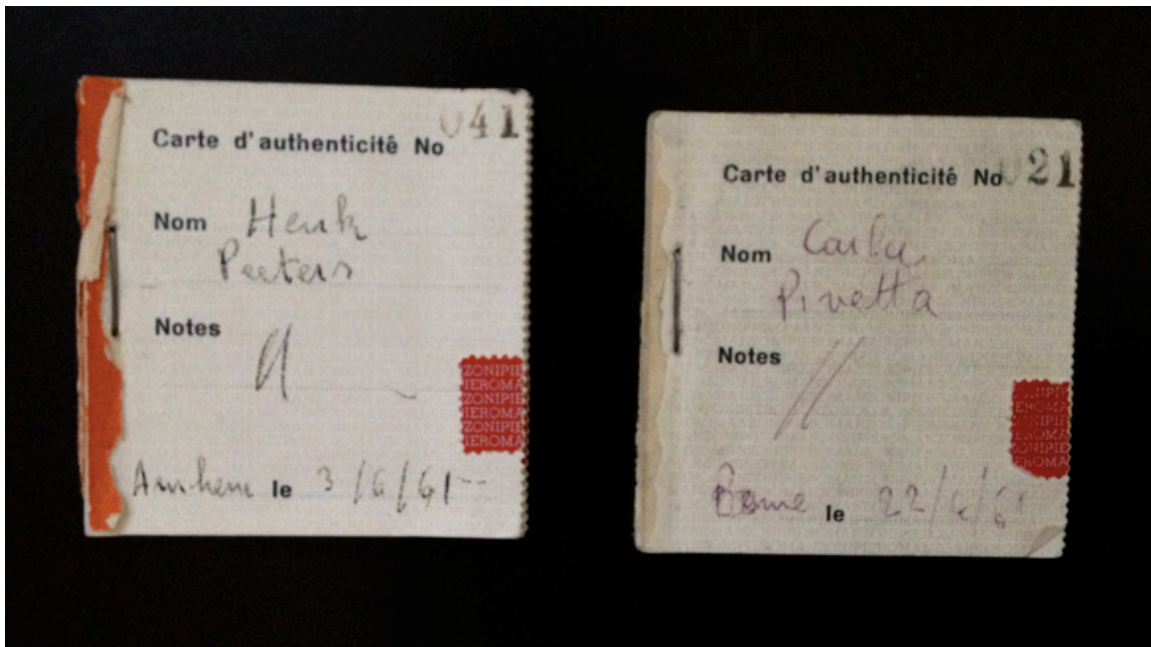


Figure 42. Piero Manzoni. Certificates of Authenticity (stubs). 1961

Certificates of authenticity traditionally accompany works of art at their moment of sale. From a historical perspective, these adjuncts became increasingly necessary as art became increasingly commodified, as networks of exchange carried works ever farther afield from the local conditions of their production (a period, incidentally, which roughly coincided with the advent of the notion of individual authorship and its attendant property relations). But in 1961 the incorporation of the bureaucratic document into the internal operation of the piece itself serves several purposes. First, it presents the labor and techniques of art production as a system of discursive acts or performative utterances. A performative act is the kind of speech act that effects the thing it names, producing its own object like a spoken promise or a judicial sentencing. Manzoni may declare a given person a work of art just as a justice of the peace may declare a couple married, by virtue of institutionally-mediated authority embedded in ritual discourse and legalistic systems of verification. The ritual of the autograph inscribed on the Living Sculpture, like a

marriage ceremony, is accompanied by supplementary certificates which legally document the force of discursive action. Therefore the certificates execute, embody, ratify, and represent the work of art as such. Second, the Certificates move the logic of the supplement from the margins to the center of the artwork. What was once secondary, hidden from view as a banality of institutionalization and an embarrassing concession to the commodity-form, has become a primary operation. The institutional structures that buttress the work of art's status as such become works in their own right—both performative performance and material object—thus questioning the role of institutional apparatuses in the cultural administration of art objects generally. As the material bases of discourse, what the certificates reveal is that their allegedly supplementary status is actually constitutive of the performative act itself.

Similar observations could also be made of other certificate-based works of the era, including those by both Klein and Robert Morris. Klein issued documents for his *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility*, empty spaces that the artist had impregnated with spiritual significance (Fig. 43). Upon receipt of his certificate, the collector would ceremoniously burn it while Klein tossed a portion of the payment—in the form of gold-leaf—into the Seine. It is not for nothing that Klein named these protocols “rituals” of transference. Even as they invoke the discursive basis of authenticity, they abjure materiality as the basis of discourse; Klein's certificates double back on themselves to reinscribe discourse and its documents into the magic circle of mysticism. The paper certificate must be ritually immolated, consigned to an elemental cleansing by air and fire. Even the money commodity is made light as leaves, sheltering exchange value in a shower of glittering airborne flakes.



Figure 43. Yves Klein. Certificate for Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility. 1959

Robert Morris' *Document* of 1963 inverted the logic of the certifying statement. The piece features a framed "Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal," a legally notarized document in which Morris negates "all esthetic quality and content" from a previous work of art (his metal construction called *Litanies* from the same year). Symptomatic of an anti-aesthetic impulse, such deferrals to discourse would come to characterize much of Conceptual Art later in the decade.

But unlike Morris's piece, which self-reflexively addressed another work of art, or Klein's, which promoted spirituality in a mystification of the exchange process, Manzoni's addresses living human bodies. Manzoni famously certified his Belgian friend Marcel Broodthaers with a red stamp as a living artwork for life. In an ironic turn on the Open Work, certificate No. 73 also gave Umberto Eco a red stamp,²⁰⁹ and he even signed and exhibited himself.²¹⁰

Although the majority of the Certificates addressed the body as a whole, some certificates introduce a differential status within the body and its systems. In May of '61 Manzoni designated only the right arm of Luisa Tien as a work, and the following month

²⁰⁹ Celant 2009, p. 276

²¹⁰ Ibid. p. 135

he declared Gurt Romijn's stomach a living sculpture. This division of bodily labor may operate spatially, between the arm and the remaining parts, for instance, or temporally, between drinking and not-drinking, for example. Certificate No. 12 designates Raffaele Menster a work only when standing in profile.²¹¹ The same reifying systematicity that divides the industrial work process and estranges the worker from his labor-power now sets into the body itself, isolating its dimensions, its capacities, or its variabilities as a series of useful specializations. The physical continuity of the biological body once provided the primary (illusory) signifier of the individual subject, but through the performative dimension of Manzoni's readymade, the wholeness of the body (its storied organic unity) is shattered into thinglike fragments.

In the system of stamps, color becomes the code that regulates the body. Art history provides a host of precedents in which color is made autonomous, unlinked from mimetic naturalism and assigned instead a poetic or emotional consonant—in Gauguin or Kandinsky, for example. The color swatches in Duchamp's *Tu m'* (1918) removed the last traces of naturalism in color by casting its production as industrialized—as readymade samples. The trope of the industrial design swatch would subsequently be taken up by Rauschenberg, Kelly, and Klein in the 1950's. In Manzoni, however, color assimilates itself to an administrative order. Totally deracinated from any natural, emotional, or poetic referent, each color is randomly assigned to a category of corporeal control. The chromatic spectrum becomes a filing system for bodies according to their performative institutional production as sculpture. Each hue designates a particular axis of interpellation, designating whether, how, and in what capacity a body will be addressed as an aesthetic object. One color can preserve the wholeness of the body free

²¹¹ Celant 2004, p. 522.

from economic, if not institutional demands, whereas another will invoke that same wholeness as a commodity for sale. A third color will slice the body into pieces, calling this part different from the rest, whereas a fourth will divide up the body according to its physiological requirements or its capacities to perform certain tasks.

These human artworks offer a darkly comic staging of a profound alienation of the body from itself in the bureaucratic register of the notarized document. It is all a grand joke—Broodthaers said their encounter was as “two comedians”—but the joke has a sinister punchline.²¹² The body is shown to be *always already* defined, either as a physical whole or in fragments, through the paper-shuffling of official forms in the discursive ministry that comprises the corporeal. The artist-as-clerk subsumes bodies and their parts—and, by extension, all bodies—into the registers of an alienating and anonymous uniformity.

Linked ineluctably to its embodiment, the self does not escape, either. The construction and maintenance of selfhood as the production of difference, of a membrane between me and not-me that operates with and upon the body (and is often enough taken to be coterminous with the epidermis) is here systematically, gleefully violated, or better, shown to be continually undermined in infinite, quotidian acts of discursive violence. The web of text that structures my self and my world, my place in it, is suddenly revealed to penetrate the body, to transgress the imagined boundaries of self to radically estrange the body from itself. When stamped with the authority of the proper institutions or their representatives (a judge, a doctor, or an artist, in this case) a slip of paper can instantly reorient subject position more effectively than a course of psychoanalysis. That such

²¹² Quoted in Marie Puck-Broodthaers, *Piero Manzoni: Soucino 1933-Milano 1963* (Brussels: Galerie des Beaux-Arts, 1987), unpaginated.

violence is committed painlessly, with the flattery of aestheticization, makes Manzoni's operation all the more insidiously mimetic of the conditions of daily life under advanced capitalism, where subjects participate in their own violation which they are unable to recognize as such.

That the body is fragmented or hybridized and yet at the same time brought within the scope of the classical body reveals a strategy: in its relation to processes of power, the subject is made object of those processes. To have the body dissected and reassigned according to a bureaucratic logic yokes the self to the machinery of power that promises fulfillment, integration, or happiness. We can partake in the grandeur of power only by being discursively torn apart by it, atomized not only as discrete individuals, but further as an assemblage of valuable parts and useful functions.

Manzoni's gestures of appropriation are obviously predicated on the precedent of Marcel Duchamp. As with so much of Manzoni's work, many of his pieces anticipate by several years the developments associated with Conceptual Art, but far more than the Conceptualists, Manzoni acknowledged the full range of associations triggered by Duchamp's readymades. He recognized with astonishing prescience that the readymade not only involved *both* an analytic proposition *and* serial commodification, but also that it would necessarily instrumentalize the body even in its most private physiological, psychosexual, and social functionality, as Duchamp's *Fountain* and *LHOOQ* had done decades before. By placing the body at the center of a praxis that adopted the mechanisms of mass-production, Manzoni's readymades weave a transgressive corporeality with the performativity of (artistic) language in such a way that each ends up negating any and all liberatory claims of the other. Advances in distribution format

(performance and newsreel) are countered by a crude semi-pornographic objectification of the body and a debasement of art's classicist promises, for example. A work that eludes the commodification of the artwork and fêtes the discursive power of the author ends up reifying relations of artist and participant alike in a legal-bureaucratic apparatus of bodily determination. Not incidentally, the specific form of this apparatus links the artistic performative (aka nominalism aka analytic proposition) back to the judge or justice of the peace, performativity's central avatars as first articulated by J.L. Austin when he first developed the notion. For Manzoni, language is never solely a structural or semiotic enterprise, but rather a contingent network of associations that is linked inextricably to the political and economic experience of its historical moment, that is to say the historical circumstances that condition its existence in the first place.

The performative inevitably invokes questions of authority, agency, and authorship. In an *October* roundtable about Conceptual Art and Duchamp reception, Thierry de Duve makes the following statement,

Whenever you go into the question of what is a performative, the question of what authority underlies the act always arises....Of course the problem with the tautology was that it repressed questions of hidden power...Not to mention the ethical problem related to the utopia of everyone is an artist, which also fuels other people's practices, not only that of Conceptual art. Beuys, for example.²¹³

Manzoni's early intervention in this question is to flip the subject-object dynamic. It's not that "everyone is an artist." Far from it, as only he wields the pen, the paper, and the power. The position of agent, the subject of power, is denied to anyone but him. The position that expands to a certain mock-universal is not the position of the artist, but the

²¹³ Thierry de Duve in Alberro, Buchloh et al., "Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp," *October*, Vol. 70, *The Duchamp Effect* (Autumn, 1994), p. 135.

position of object. Only an authorized few may inhabit the subject of the performative utterance, but all of a sudden, anyone or anything may become its object.

What is so startling about this development in Manzoni's practice is the way in which it simultaneously qualifies and critiques the subject of the performative act, that is to say the artist as agent. For in the proliferation of institutional infrastructure that *is* the material execution of the performative act—the certificates, the stamps, the labels, the bases—the artist undergoes a certain transformation. To the degree that the discursive power of artistic agency is enlarged through the promiscuous performative, so also is his or her identity increasingly defined by the institutional structures through which that power is exercised and indeed produced. This occurs in two ways: first, the artist-as-brand, and second, the complete elimination of subjective selection in the readymade performativity of the Bases.

Manzoni's Base Materialism: Magic Bases 1 and 2

Manzoni was hardly the first to question the role of the base. From Rodin to Minimalism, the role of the base appears as a perennial problematic. Indeed, as David Getsy writes, the criticism and eventual abandonment of the pedestal became a “central theme of the narratives of modern sculpture.”²¹⁴

Brancusi's remarkable bases help bring the historical stakes into focus. Their status vis-a-vis the sculptures they support and their categorization within Brancusi's oeuvre remain topics of some controversy among scholars. Interpretations range from

²¹⁴ David Getsy, “Fallen Women: The Gender of Horizontality and the Abandonment of the Pedestal by Giacometti and Epstein,” in Alexandra Gerstein (ed.), *Display and Displacement: Sculpture and the Pedestal from the Renaissance to Post-Modern*, (London: Courtauld Institute, 2003), p. 114. Getsy's article draws heavily on themes first articulated in Rosalind Krauss' *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

outright disavowals of the bases as works, though timorous negotiations of their status, to an embrace of the bases as integral elements of the sculpture. This latter interpretation would seem to be supported by Brancusi himself, who wrote, “The pedestal should be part of the sculpture, otherwise I must do without it completely.”²¹⁵ Anna Chave’s detailed study of Brancusi documents the multiple ways in which the artist conceived of specific and variable sculpture-base relationships. For instance: certain sculptures were wedded to particular bases, while others could be exchanged at the whim of the collector. An object which functioned as a complete work in one setting could subsequently serve as a base for another work, and sometimes several sculptures, bases, and even the stools he sat on in his studio would be combined together into a large composite. Brancusi even photographed some of his handmade stools on top of the bases, as if even these utilitarian objects were interchangeable with a finished sculpture.²¹⁶ Presciently, Brancusi on several occasions spoke of allowing a sculpture to rest directly on the floor. Especially at such an astonishingly early date, the object’s ostentatious rejection of the base simultaneously draws attention to the traditional function of the pedestal by means of its conspicuous absence.

This is not to assert that there is no difference between Brancusi’s sculptures and his bases. In fact, it is Brancusi’s preservation of classical distinctions within hybrid form that allows such hierarchies as “sculpture/base” to come into question in the first place. Chave writes, “...what is at issue in such mutations or migrations between base

²¹⁵ Barbu Brezianu, *Brancusi in Romania*, trans. Delia Răzdolescu and Ilie Marcu (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialist România, 1976), p. 16; also quoted in Anna Chave, *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 189.

²¹⁶ Chave, *Shifting the Bases*, p. 218; for an extended discussion of Brancusi and functional furniture, see also Scott Burton, “My Brancusi: The Table and its Double,” *MoMA* No. 51 (Spring 1989), p. 4.

and sculpture is a leveling of categories that are customarily segregated and hierarchized.”²¹⁷ If not precisely “leveled,” the aesthetic and epistemological distinction between sculpture and base in Brancusi becomes radically destabilized, and therefore shown to be conventional and contingent. Particularly when viewed in their many permutations across Brancusi’s oeuvre, what the heterogeneous or composite structure of these sculptural arrangements generate is a certain aporia about where the sculpture ends and the exhibitionary apparatus begins. I am struck with this aporia every time I see a group of Brancusi works installed in a museum, and indeed, museums have been known to separate Brancusi’s from their intended bases, often substituting their own, less distracting proxies.²¹⁸ By absorbing the functionality of the pedestal—including even its morphological and material difference from the object it supports—the putatively autonomous and self-enclosed form of modernist sculpture begins to bleed out into its institutional environment. The once-repressed contingencies of studio and gallery exhibition become central to the plastic logic of the sculpture itself. The institutional furniture which once lifted sculpture off the earth into numinous heights is now internalized within the heterogeneity of the sculpture, even and especially given the so-called Platonic perfection of the supported object, which declares its own paradox in its dual condition as biomorphic monad and bodily fragment.

The Brancusian precedents are evident throughout Manzoni’s oeuvre. Both artists problematize the relationship between sculpture and base, which in turn articulates a critique of classical sculpture and classicism in general. Both also launch a critique of visibility, as in Brancusi’s *Sculpture for the Blind* and Manzoni’s logic of aesthetic

²¹⁷ Chave, *Shifting the Bases*, p. 193.

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 230.

withdrawal and containment (Fig. 44). Both frequently invoke the trope of infinity (*Endless Column* [1918] and *Infinite Line* [1960]). Both repeatedly return to the iconography of the egg. Both imagine the body in fragments (Brancusi's hands and heads, Manzoni's Certificates), and explore the objectification of those bodily fragments. And in the sense that Brancusi's finely-worked artisanal objects, through their very refinement, came to resemble machine-parts or even the readymade, both artists can be said to engage the entwinement of the individual body with the seriality of mass production, the uniqueness of each human form with the "forms of the readymade."²¹⁹



Figure 44. Constantin Brancusi. Sculpture for the Blind. 1920

In this connection, Duchamp once again provides an indispensable precedent. Ever since Krauss first joined Brancusi and Duchamp in historical analysis, it has been difficult not to see them as a perfect pair, gathered together from opposing aesthetic poles to express their mutual admiration of a plane propeller. Brancusi's biomorphism mimes mass-production, just as *Fountain* indicates a mass-produced biomorphism. It should

²¹⁹ For an account of this relationship between Brancusi's sculpture and Duchamp's readymade, see the chapter "Forms of the Readymade" in Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, and the chapter "1927b" in *Art Since 1900* Vol. 1, 2nd Edition (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011).

come as no surprise, then, that the problematic of the sculpture and its base also arises in some of Duchamp's most seminal readymades. The rotation of the urinal by ninety degrees not only removes it from the wall and thus from utility, it also provides the work with a measure of stability and a few inches' elevation, thereby formally suggesting a sculptural base. The problematic also sits at the very heart of the very first readymade, which Duchamp composed by mounting a bicycle wheel on top of a wooden stool. In order to raise the mechanical wheel to the level of sculpture, it requires the slavish kitchen stool to prop it up. Duchamp compared the wheel to the hearth that a bourgeois father might contemplate after a day's work, against which the readymade posits the mechanized modernity of outdoor conveyance culture. Fire vs. bicycle, indoor vs. outdoor, domestic vs. public, elemental vs. artificial, eternal vs. historical.

Might we detect a similar dialogue between the wheel and the stool, perhaps along an axis of gender? That bourgeois father must, after all, come home to a wife, whose role in the heterosexist family arrangement is necessarily supportive, receptive, and subsidiary, domestically cloistered as she must remain. Perhaps it is pushing it too far to note that the wheel penetrates the seat of the stool with a dangling metal phallus? After all, Brancusi's sculpture is famous for its scandalous citation of genitalia in the heteromorphic conflation of sexual signifiers.²²⁰ The dis/union between stacked and gendered elements of sculpture would also become a central preoccupation of Alberto Giacometti, the artist credited with eliminating the base entirely in *Woman with Her Throat Cut* (1932), a horizontal spread of misogynistic violence.

Again, the problematic of the sculptural base would come to occupy a central place in twentieth-century forms of sculpture. By 1932 both Giacometti and Epstein had

²²⁰ This is one of Chave's central and most convincing theses.

eliminated the pedestal in what Krauss identifies as a signal moment for modern sculpture. Generations of artists would take up the legacy of critique against the *bête noir* that went by many names: pedestal, plinth, base, or *socle*. Within this piece of exhibitionary architecture, artists identified a challenge so immense that the only permissible alternatives were to disavow it entirely or to engage it critically. At the threshold of its disappearance, the base became the projected enemy of both modernist and avant-gardist formations.²²¹

²²¹The sculptural base is one of those primary devices of tradition, like a signature or a frame, that signify a work of art as such. Objects that have historically tested the limits of that category have not coincidentally invoked the authority of the base, even if only ironically. (It is not for nothing that Duchamp's bicycle wheel spins aloft above a common stool.) The base is a framing operation, analogous to the gilded quadrangles that border traditional paintings. But because its spatio-morphological relation to the sculpture is different from a picture-frame's relationship to a canvas, our phenomenological encounter with it is also different. The relationality between sculpture and base thereby allows for a different, if often overlapping, set of associations and epistemological connections than that between painting and frame. Rather than appearing within its frame, like a canvas, bounded by a continuous border which limns the break between it and the world, the sculpture appears on top of its frame, the sculptural base. True enough, the upper surface of the base is itself a flat surface, with edges and limits, but it is incumbent upon the sculpture to emerge upward from out of this space in order for the base to do its job in the first place. The assumed vertical orientation of the bipedal body, upon which so much of both sculpture and painting traditionally depended, also entails a phenomenological encounter of the sculpture-base pair at least initially or primarily as a stacking operation. This on top of that. Or rather *that* on top of *this*, since it is the sculpture which is lifted into a more distant spatial position, while the base, by means of its very propinquity to the viewer, fades from notice into a secondary position. The sculpture-base pairing is a more ostentatiously hierarchical relation even than the picture and the frame. After all, classical figural sculpture keeps its base beneath its feet, under the heel, as it were, of the represented body. This master-slave relation is dramatized famously by the snake beneath toes of the Madonna, the dwarf figure beneath the foot of Siva Nataraja, and calls to mind the humiliation of the Caryatids, figures brought so low as to become supporting elements, bases. Pedestals present a series of art-historical debasements.

In introducing a spatial and altitudinal differentiation between the work of art and its environment, the base enables a particular object to be visually isolated. The object can thus (allegedly) be contemplated on its own visual terms, distinct from its surrounds. This isolation operates not only phenomenologically, but historically and ideologically as well, since the gradual separation of sculpture from its architectural container (a medieval cathedral, for instance) accompanied its gradual transition from cult-value to exhibition-value: the more distinctly visible, the more exhibitable; the more portable, the more exchangeable; the more discrete, the more self-enclosed it became.

Even as it performs its traditional separating and isolating functions, however, the base also inevitably fastens the work of art to its institutional context. Selected more often by

The dialectics of the pedestal helps explain how artists as diverse as the Minimalists and Yves Klein could both completely repudiate the base, but for totally incompatible reasons. One goal of Minimalism was to place an embodied viewer in a spatio-temporal encounter with the object and its environment, and consequently, in order for the works to embrace phenomenological contextuality, the base had to disappear. Kynaston McShine takes pains to emphasize the complete absence of pedestals in the catalog to his landmark *Primary Structures* exhibition in 1966.²²² There can be no artifice of separation for works aspiring to presence.

Although Klein also wished to “liberate the sculpture from its base,” it was not to situate it ever more literally in the world, but rather to imagine its literal apotheosis: its transcendence of the world and its ascendance into the air. For his exhibition *Le Vide* at Iris Clert in 1958, Klein planned to illuminate the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde in blue light while leaving its pedestal dark so that the monument would appear to levitate in the night air. He declared, “This will restore to the monument all the mystical

curatorial staff than by artists, bases and pedestals are small promontories of exhibitionary architecture. Even outside of the architectural container, in the middle of a meadow—especially there, in fact—the base below a sculpture refers back to the institutional complex of which it is vestige and metonym. Regardless of the artworks they buttress, bases must remain logically continuous with the space of exhibition so as not to be mistaken for the work itself. In this sense, the pedestal is less a separation device than an institutional contradiction.

To put it schematically, the sculptural base serves two contradictory functions:

First of all, it is the element that uplifts the artwork. It is an apotheosis. It is the thing that makes possible the literal and metaphoric elevation of a sculpture up and away from the banalities and contingencies of quotidian life and into realms of autonomy, spirit, universality. The cliché “to put something on a pedestal” amounts to an idealization so fundamental as to be proverbially equivalent with reverence itself. The classical sculptural base is therefore the mediating axis of the opposition between high and low.

By this very function, however, the base is an expedient, a debasement. It makes unseemly concessions to context and contingency. Its brute materiality, even in classical disguise, binds art to the earth by gravitational force. It just sits there. It is an embarrassing makeshift whose presence bruises the soul of the artwork. It would be better if it were out of sight, better if it weren’t there at all. Like all good servants, it ought to remain invisible.

²²² Kynaston McShine, *Primary Structures* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1966), unpaginated.

brilliance of ancient antiquity and contribute, at the same time, a solution to the perennial problem that the plinth has always posed [to] sculpture.”²²³ The goal was to abjure materialism once and for all in a shining declaration of spiritual transcendence hovering above the square “like an enormous unpunctuated exclamation mark,” as Klein so evocatively phrased it. Unfortunately, the necessary permits from the Préfecture of the Seine and Électricité de France were never granted, and the project was not realized. The implication is clear, however: for Klein, the base represented all that art must overcome, the gravitational materiality and factual contingency which inhibit “the monumental movement of the affective imagination.”²²⁴

In an age when artists across the ideological spectrum (and on both sides of the Atlantic) were eliminating the sculptural base, Manzoni made a work that is composed of nothing else. The piece calls equally on the readymade and classical sculpture, two realms of art that, traditionally speaking, could not be more opposed. Though it rests on the ground, it enables the vertical elevation of the figure which, suddenly defined from below, cancels the idealizing humanity of the classical tradition it imitates. Radical as the *Living Sculptures* and their *Certificates* may be, they are still predicated on the physical presence of the artist, and thus traces of the mystical transfer from the artist’s hand still remain, if only in the authenticating flourish of the autograph. By contrast, the *Magic Bases* offer a do-it-yourself model of bodily alienation.

The first *Base magica*—subtitled *Scultura vivente* in an explicit continuation of the earlier work—is a trapezoidal prism that rises and tapers in space. On its top surface, footprints are arranged at an angle to one another, the left foot straight forward, the right

²²³ Yves Klein, *Overcoming the Problematics of Art*, p. 52.

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 52.

slightly behind and slanted off to the side—perhaps to encourage a decorous pose befitting a classical figure. Contrapposto would work beautifully here. The second Magic Base, built in Copenhagen, assumes the more modest morphology of a wooden cube, and significantly, it lacks the instructional footprints of its predecessor. Also absent is the subtitle “living sculpture,” because with this piece the fungibility of bipedal bodies expands to include nonhuman and indeed nonliving objects as well. Any-thing at all, in fact, that can be placed atop this block becomes a work of art, at least momentarily. Human bodies take their place in the world of objects, exchangeable for one another and for any other commodity.

Simply by occupying the designated perch on the top of the base, a person or indeed any object at all can immediately transform into a readymade work of art.²²⁵ It is as though in passing through a narrow shaft of space on the lid of a box, the body is momentarily redefined through the institutional powers that condense there, the legacy of decades of avant-garde innovations. The appropriation is never exhaustive, of course. To the daily chorus of shifting interpellations that continually construct subjectivity is simply added another ephemeral call, but it is in moving—bodily—in and out of a single space of interpellation that the stability and naturalism of subjectivity is called into question. The artist does not absolve himself from his own game, as a photograph from 1961 attests. Once again, the comedian smiles.

What happens to the subject (become object) on Manzoni’s Bases suggests a deterministic view of selfhood: that subjectivity and the very notion of selfhood itself are products of social relations and historical sedimentation. As Marx put it, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being

²²⁵ Celant 2007, p. 289.

that determines their consciousness.”²²⁶ The critique of the subject that would proliferate during the later 60’s took many forms: the death of authorship, ideological interpellation, and discourse theory are only the best-known. The rise of identity politics in the latter half the decade, though occasionally seen as a recuperation of the subject, is in fact an extension of a thoroughgoing critique of that category’s universalism, in that the specificity of various identities requires the understanding of subject *positionality*: selfhood as always-already an element of the means and relations of production. It is not for nothing that the opening salvo of this series of works attacks the subject along the axis of a violent misogyny.

With the Magic Base, the dismantling of traditional authorship that occurs in participatory works of art forecloses in advance any embrace of collective action, just as it eschews any mythology of an enlightened, activated, or emancipated spectator that was alleged to result from such frameworks. The Bases critique traditional authorship by ceding to circumstance and participation the materials and form of the sculptural work of art, but within this cession, the mythic name of the artist is preserved, just as it would be during ensuing decades of spectacularized participatory works and installations. Pioneered by the historical avant-garde, the techniques of combatting the name-of-the-author proved perfectly amenable to the needs of spectacle, as long as they could be recoded as a brand, a development which Manzoni was among the first to realize. The interpellative recoding to which a viewer-participant is subjected when standing on a Base disrupts the subjective autonomy of both artist and participant while simultaneously invoking the individualizing techniques of power within which they are mutually defined.

²²⁶ Karl Marx, Preface to “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenko (New York: Penguin, 1983), p. 160.

Emphatically fungible, the body on the base is defined by its exchangeability. In eliminating plastic form as a relevant variable in the construction of a work of art, the specular constitution of a corporeal subject takes place in an anti-aesthetic of visual indifference. In short, it doesn't matter what you look like, just as Duchamp claimed total aesthetic indifference to the objects he selected as readymades. In its simultaneous dismissal of plastic form and the creation of a manipulating visual field, the Magis Base demonstrates the interpellative power of visibility even as it displaces visual form.²²⁷

What is particularly incisive about these works is that the participant finds herself instrumentalized and reified at the hands of art, which previously served as a refuge—illusory or not—from those very processes in the praxis of everyday life. Both the practitioners and the spectatorial enthusiasts of Abstract Expressionism could still speak of freedom, for example, in the increasingly uncertain (and therefore grotesque-comically amplified) tradition of Surrealism and other utopian avant-gardisms from the past. Manzoni's contemporary Klein had unwittingly demonstrated the bathos that would result when these claims continued to be made under postwar historical conditions. Johns and Rauschenberg, even within the occasional and increasing pictorialization of their work, had drawn on Duchamp to begin to circumscribe the aesthetically-mediated possibilities of subjective freedom. At about the same time as Warhol in New York,

²²⁷ This aspect of the Bases invites comparison with the Lacanian screen. As synopsised by Martin Jay, Lacan's divided subject exists in both the "eye" at the apex of the Cartesian/Albertian perspectival pyramid and in the screen intersecting an opposing pyramid, the "being-seen" Lacan calls the "gaze." In both instances, a divided subjectivity is constituted in a dynamic of visibility in which vision itself is dismissed, displaced, and denigrated. The person standing on the base enacts her own subjective fragmentation by inhabiting the being-seen of the Lacanian gaze, a live performance of the "morbid scission" at work in the Certificates. That the body retains its mythic wholeness on the base—another perverse invocation of classicism—stages the treachery of visual bodily objectification, the same *meconnaissance* of corporeal Gestalt as in the Mirror Stage. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

Manzoni was among the first to see that as art institutions become increasingly defined by the requirements of spectacle and leisure (labor's dialectical opposite), then aspirations to de-alienation or subjective activation would no longer be sustainable. What the Bases signify is that it is specifically in its complicity with spectacle that practices of the neo-avantgarde could come not only to affirm, but enact and advance processes of reification. The prevailing order not only survives its critique by works of art, but even thrives on their very resistance by showing its magnanimity in the face of criticism.



Figure 45. Ole Bagger (photo). Magician Leif Böckel on Magic Base #2. 1961

Particularly for the second version of the Base, bodily contortions are required to accommodate the world of commodities. Its diminutive size accords to a scale more appropriate to small everyday objects than to the average adult body. A photograph of an early participant in Denmark shows a man precariously bent-kneed and on tiptoes,

acrobatically shuffling cards for our amusement like an illusionist at a carnival (Fig. 45).²²⁸ Contortions could not be more apropos, however, nor could magic tricks on this magic base. The piece promotes a convivial atmosphere that might initially promise hope of redemption, the naïve faith in carnivalesque subversions.

For Herbert Marcuse, writing a few years after these Bases were first put into action, the carnivalesque body still secreted a dialectical moment within:

When the body has completely become an object, a beautiful thing, it can foreshadow a new happiness. In suffering the most extreme reification man triumphs over reification. The artistry of the beautiful body, its effortless agility and relaxation, which can be displayed today only in the circus, vaudeville, and burlesque, herald the joy to which men will attain in being liberated from the ideal, once mankind, having become a true subject, succeeds in the mastery of matter.²²⁹

Marcuse's passage would locate in the total corporeal objectification—common to the circus and the Magic Base—an adumbration of its dialectical complement: a sensual subject freed from the idealizing affirmations of the soul. Among critical theorists, Marcuse was least shy to offer possibilities of a social and economic alternative, but like all whispers of utopia, his thought is haunted by what Benjamin Buchloh has called 'the Rumpelstiltskin problem:' to speak the name of utopia is to cause it to disappear.²³⁰ The mere annunciation of the terms of subjective freedom inscribes it

²²⁸ This card-juggler was in fact a magician by trade, one Leif Böckel. He is still living (and occasionally performing card tricks) in Herning to this day.

²²⁹ Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 116.

²³⁰ I am indebted to Benjamin Buchloh for this very helpful notion. Adorno and Bloch confront a similar difficulty in their 1964 conversation about utopia and its impossibility, "Something's Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradiction of Utopian Longing," in Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

within the profoundly circumscribed and historically determined limits of language. Given the linguistic and conceptual formations available at any given historical moment, it may be impossible to think, let alone to speak, utopia. To provide a positive articulation of future happiness amounts to an impossible project, an attempt to cultivate freedom with the tools of the symbolic order with all of its hierarchies, its blindnesses, its historical limitations intact.²³¹ It is therefore necessary to seek glimpses of freedom in its most extreme opposite, under circumstances in which an utter negation can conjure the fleeting apparition of its Other.

Notice, too, that when Marcuse looks for a body unfree in its corporeal capacity, he looks not to the assembly line or the prison, but to the spectacle. The instrumentalization and reification of the body are *de rigueur* in any capitalist arrangement; indeed, these are some of capital's fundamental processes, which normally go masked or excused by the idealizing logic that Marcuse decries. Under conditions of exhibition and spectacle, however, bodily reification reaches a certain limit: a body so totally determined by conditions of visibility that it renders objectification itself visible.

It is notable here that Manzoni (like Marcuse) conjures a rather different order of spectacle than was currently colonizing all phases of art and life in the capitalist world, which marks a departure from the filmic distribution format of the first *Living Sculptures*. The Bases engage spectacle at its most elemental, even naïve level, at which a dialectical view of bodily reification, at least according to Marcuse, might still be possible. It may be that the modalities of subjective interpellation in advanced spectacular social relations (like television, for instance) are so naturalized after the long period of sedimentation that

²³¹ Foucault also takes this position in his debate with Chomsky; cf. Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature* (New York: New Press, 2006).

their development entailed that all visibility of the reification inherent in them has been foreclosed, or perhaps made so overwhelming as to seem inevitable. In Marcuse's rather sentimental carnivalesque, it takes the face-to-face encounter of the live show, itself an increasingly antiquarian form of spectacle more and more defined by the requirements of reproducibility and mass dissemination, to allow a confrontation (or at least its possibility) with objectification so raw that it might disclose itself as such.

The *Socle du monde* and the Death of Carnival

With the Bases' clownish invocation of magic tricks, burlesque performance and other aspects of the fairground, Manzoni's practice does indeed constellate a relationship to the carnivalesque.²³² As is well known from Bakhtin's venerable study of Rabelais, the carnivalesque is a literary mode predicated on inversion and grotesquerie. It arose from medieval European peasant culture, from the time of year just before Lent in which work was ended, a period of festivity was enjoined, and all social hierarchies momentarily displaced or parodically reversed. For a short while in the cycle of the year, people of unequal caste would mingle in the streets, theatrical events would mock the clergy and nobility, and wealthy lords would throw open their doors, inviting the rabble to feast. The suspension of hierarchies, however brief and licit, allows Bakhtin to think of carnival as a provisional fulfillment of the dreams of universal humanism. He

²³² Carnival and circus are in fact frequent themes of art during the period, especially in Italian film and American Happenings. Federico Fellini had been exploring the cinematic carnivalesque for years. In New York, Jim Dine and others frequently dressed as clowns for their Happenings. Allan Kaprow wrote of this tendency in an international context, including Milan: "In addition, outside New York there is the Gutai group in Osaka; reported activity in San Francisco, Chicago, Cologne, Paris, and Milan; and a history that goes back through Surrealism, Dada, Mime, the circus, carnivals, the traveling saltimbanques, all the way to medieval mystery plays and processions." Kaprow, "Happenings in the New York Scene," p. 16.

conceives of this period in breathlessly valorizing terms: “The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.”²³³

Over time the carnival developed its own language and tropes, an entire literary and cultural mode which Bakhtin locates in Rabelais and elsewhere. It is possible to stipulate a few of its characteristics. The mode is grotesque, populated by bodies with gaping orifices and their respective bodily functions. The mode is critical, opposed to the individualizing ideation of the classical body. The mode is materialist, celebrating the earthiness of the body and its connection to the maternal earth. And finally the mode is parodic, deploying subversive laughter as social critique and equalizing all people as objects and subjects of laughter.

How can we fail to see an invocation of the carnivalesque in Manzoni’s work? Jacopo Galimberti has recently written on Manzoni’s works in precisely these terms. He argues that Manzoni puts on an identification with peasant traditions, and he sees Manzoni’s work as evocative of the carnivalesque’s subversive laughter and even of its rather extravagant utopianism.²³⁴ No doubt, works like *Artist’s Shit*, the *Uova*, and *Artist’s Breath* center on a body that is indeed grotesque—defecating, devouring, and heaving as it does. Manzoni’s grotesque body, in absentia, is defined by orificial requirements in an assault on the classical body that is carried through in the *Living Sculptures*. He also imagines the body as resolutely materialist. To be sure, Manzoni

²³³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Hélène Iswolsky, trans., (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 10. Bakhtin’s effusive valorization of the carnivalesque comes under thoroughgoing criticism in the literature on the subject. See the introduction to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), which includes a review of this literature.

²³⁴ Jacopo Galimberti, “The Intellectual and the Fool: Piero Manzoni between the Milanese Art Scene and the Land of Cockaigne,” *Oxford Art Journal* 35.1 (2012), pp. 75-94.

invokes the carnivaleque. But whether his work is an *embrace* of this mode and its utopian potentialities is a very different question indeed.

Which brings us to the *Socle du monde* (Fig. 46). The last installment in this series of works, the third and final Magic Base was created in 1961 in Denmark. It is by far the largest of the three, an imposing one meter-high parallelepiped of iron and bronze. Installed in a meadow outside the Heart Museum in Herning, the writing on the base is upside down. In a rotation of 180 degrees, Manzoni declares the entire planet to be a work of art. The *Socle* is therefore global, but in retrospect, so too is the series of works from which it was born. Not unlike the polyglot labeling of *Artist's Shit*, all three of the Bases are situated in an international, even globalized context. Each Base speaks a different tongue: first *Base magica-Scultura vivente* (Italian), then *Magisk Sokkel* (Danish), then finally *Socle du monde* (French). How fitting that the base of the world should voice its imperialist claims in the erstwhile lingua franca of European diplomacy. Moreover, the *Socle* was not the only one of Manzoni's works to address the earth as a medium. He also proposed drawing a line that would circumnavigate the globe along the Greenwich meridian, splitting the earth into its hemispheres. He also proposed drawing a line equaling the circumference of the globe, to be interred in segments encased in lead at various cities of the world, a project he initiated with the *Linea* of 7.2 km at Herning (1960).



Figure 46. Piero Manzoni. Socle du monde. 1961

With its earthly avowals and critical reversals, the traditional emblem of the carnivalesque is the “world upside-down,” a visual and literary figure for universal inversion. In this way, the *Socle* is central to Manzoni’s engagement of the carnivalesque, and it forms the lynchpin of Galimberti’s argument. But the question that Manzoni poses most insistently in the *Socle du monde* is this: ‘can the carnivalesque retain its revolutionary power under contemporary historical conditions?’

Following the development of satellite technologies like sputnik and the internationalization of a military apparatus capable of exterminating the entire human race, the years around 1960 saw a sudden and radical relativization of planetary

existence.²³⁵ Writing in 1958, Hanna Arendt marveled at the historical newness of this realization, that the “human condition” of earthliness could become contingent, and that human beings could become so suddenly estranged from their own planet. By 1959, Soviet and American aerospace technologies had rendered the first images of the globe from space, literalizing Siegfried Kracauer’s observation from generations before that “the world itself has taken on a ‘photographic face.’”²³⁶ It is the fulfillment of what Kracauer called the go-for-broke game of history, the total conquest (and consequent alienation) of nature. This era also marks a dawning awareness of the economic globalization already well underway, which Marx had predicted already in the 19th century. It has only been in the past few decades that the actual terms of capital’s triumph have become factually obvious as globalization and empirically verifiable as climate change, but the reshuffled terms of planetary existence that emerged on the cusp of ‘the Space Age’ entailed a dizzying reorientation of humankind’s relationship to the earth. The resulting estrangement, and the anxiety it provoked, is perhaps historically comparable only to Galileo’s reorientation of the solar system in the 17th Century. It should come as no surprise, then, that Manzoni dedicates the *Socle* to that same baroque astronomer; the *Socle* is subtitled “Hommage à Galileo.”

What also became increasingly clear in the early sixties, to Manzoni as to Marcuse, was that the power of industrial civilization to withstand and reconcile its own internal opposition was actually far greater than had yet been imagined. Recall that this

²³⁵ Manzoni was certainly attentive to sputnik and to space-age technologies in general. He wrote to Otto Piene that he was sending along a “photo of a sputnik” with the Placentarium texts, and that the theater should have the same look. Correspondence reprinted in Celant 2004, p. 263.

²³⁶ Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” *The Mass Ornament*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 59.

series of works began in front of a newsreel camera. Thus Manzoni combines the avant-garde technique of the readymade with the hoary populism of the carnivalesque in a work whose subversive capability is immediately canceled by its own reifying spectacularization. Historical technologies of critique, though powerful in the moment of their articulation, are suddenly vulnerable to cooption under spectacularized social relations, like *Umfunktionierung* in reverse. This is of course precisely what was about to befall the readymade, the monochrome, displaced authorship, and montage aesthetics within a year or two in the work of Andy Warhol.

For Manzoni, these forces operate directly upon and within the body itself in a rhetoric of reification that is subsequently shown to envelop the entire globe. From the specific patriarchal objectification of a single subject-position, namely women, to an ever expanding exploitation in which all subject-positions and all humans become fungible with each other and with nonhuman objects, the Bases extend finally to a planetary reach in which all the world is subject to an integrated systematicity. They represent the perverse fulfillment of the liberal humanist dream of universality.

The carnivalesque traditionally registers its critique in the form of subversive laughter, and it is to the humorous aspects of Manzoni's work that Galimberti points. Gregory Tentler likewise includes an entire chapter on Manzoni's humor in his 2010 dissertation. But when Manzoni speaks of laughter, it bears little resemblance to the democratizing levity of Bakhtin's utopian fairgrounds. Take, for instance, this excerpt from a letter to Ben Vautier about the *Living Sculptures*: "For the 'others,' I thought of sealing them in parallelepipeds in transparent plastic material; they die (naturally!) and

stay there, and you can see them and laugh at them.”²³⁷ In other words, he proposes to suspend a corpse in plastic, even killing the person in the process, in order for us all to laugh at it. Laughter in the face of death may have been a hallmark of carnival, but laughing at a dead body is quite another matter. Manzoni’s laughter is cruel and nihilistic, the kind of laughter that Adorno identifies in the culture industry, under whose lens “death begins to be comic.” Adorno despairs that people have become moved “to chortle over corpses,” sure evidence that the loss of the dignity death once held marks the dissolution of the individual subject as well.²³⁸

Under the impact of the culture industry, carnival’s “world upside down” finds itself replaced by a new planetary inversion: the global glory of spectacle, which inverts not serf and master, but rather subject and object, producer and product, in a glittering, endlessly-proliferating affirmation of capital. As Debord would write just six years later, “In a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.”²³⁹ Unlike in carnival, Manzoni’s world-upside-down offers *not even a temporary reversal of social relations*. Instead, we find bodies that suggest liberation only in embodying its extreme opposite, or the entire globe hailed as a commodity. In this sense, the *Socle* contradicts all claims of a ludic play of possibility. It represents the totalitarian reach of administrated culture, the spectacularized relations which absorb and reconcile erstwhile subversive modes of aesthetic practice. As the readymade world, nature itself transforms

²³⁷ Celant 2009, p. 246.

²³⁸ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 232.

²³⁹ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Aphorism #9, p. 14. Debord also writes, “The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life” (#2, p. 12); and “It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory” (#13, p. 15).

into product of industrialized culture. Manzoni's invocation of the carnivalesque is thus not so much its mobilization as its negation, the declaration of its death at the hands of spectacle, carnival's heir and replacement.

Chapter Three: Organic Plastic: Manzoni's Materials

Organic vs. Synthetic

In 1957 Piero Manzoni triumphantly declared, “We want to organicize disintegration.” In the manifesto “For an Organic Painting,” he rejected the geometric rationalism of his neoconstructivist contemporaries in favor of free-flowing biomorphic forms. This was in June of ‘57, when Manzoni was still associated with the Arte Nucleare movement—indeed the manifesto was a group project cosigned by other Nuclear artists—and a series of organicist statements would soon follow.²⁴⁰ The same group declared in August their intention to make painting “a natural and spontaneous continuation of our psychobiological processes, an offshoot of our organic life itself.”²⁴¹ Another Nuclear manifesto signed by Manzoni in September articulates a program “against the dominance of the right angle, of the gear, of the machine, against cold geometric abstraction.” Manzoni’s work during this year hews closely to the nuclear line: paintings of biomorphic hominids floating through landscapes of chromatic wash (Fig. 47), which gave way in autumn to viscous dollops of tar smothering canvases punctuated occasionally by scarlet spots (Fig. 74, p. 299). But 1957 was a year of great transition for the artist; his work would change enormously within a matter of months. He would soon abandon Nuclear painting and virtually every technique he had used in

²⁴⁰ These artists are Guido Biasi, Angelo Verga, Mario Colucci, and Ettore Sordini. *Piero Manzoni: Scritti sull’arte*, ed. Gaspare Luigi Marcone (Milano: Abscondita, 2013), p. 16.

²⁴¹ “Manifesto di Albisola Marina,” *ibid.*, p. 17-18; see also Celant 1998, p. 309.

the past. By the end of the year, he would make his first Achromes, initiating what we might call the “mature” phase of his career.²⁴²



Figure 47. Piero Manzoni. Untitled. 1957

And what of organicity? Would this too be abandoned? If the early Manzoni had derived a kind of vitalism from a revolt against chilly geometricity, how are we to read signifiers of the organic in his later work? The notion of the “organic” is famously fugitive, connoting a range of naturalist associations, the contours of which, like the artworks that wear them, are often fuzzy and fluid. What might “organic” have meant to the Manzoni of the *Living Sculptures* and the *Placentarium*, the artist who enthused about

²⁴² By the end of 1958, he would make a definitive break with Nuclear Art. In December Guido Biasi writes to Enrico Baj that Manzoni had sent him a letter “filled with poison” against Baj. Gagosian, p. 107. Around the same time, Manzoni writes to his friend Giorgio Carmenati Francia that the Nuclear Movement is “split in two,” and that he had sided with Bonalumi and Castellani against Baj and the rest. Battino p. 36

artificial fibers, plastic bodies, and fiberglass hair? Indeed, synthetic materials of all kinds abound in the *Achromes* as early as 1960: acrylic, fiberglass, polyester, and above all expanded polystyrene, what today we call Styrofoam. *Achromes* and many other works—like the *Corpo d'aria*, *Artist's Breath*, and the *Placentarium*—are made of diverse varieties of plastics, the material epitome of syntheticity. In 1961 Manzoni claimed that he had abandoned cotton in favor of nylon (a type of plastic) among other new manmade materials.²⁴³ And yet despite Manzoni's claim, organic materials would also persist in his practice. Breadrolls, eggs and indeed cotton—not to mention shit, breath, and bodies—are to be found right alongside the most technologically advanced polymers of the era. In the marked duality of its material composition, Manzoni's production comes to instigate a certain confrontation between natural and synthetic matter, the latter erupting into the former, and vice versa.

Manzoni sets the terms of this opposition almost programmatically in his final text "Some Realizations, Some Experiments, Some Projects." As the artist laconically catalogues his body of work, each time he mentions an organic material, he pairs it immediately with a synthetic one. "In '60," he writes, "I made some [*Achromes*] in cotton wool and expanded polystyrene...In '61 I carried on with still more surfaces in straw and plastic." Already plant fibers confront synthetic ones, and he continues in this vein: after "a series of paintings, also white made of balls of cotton wool," he turns immediately to those "made of natural or artificial fiber."²⁴⁴ Also on the level of technique, even for the early kaolin *Achromes*, he pairs an artisanal process with a technological one. "My first *Achromes*," he begins, "date from 1957, and are of canvases

²⁴³ Battino and Palazzoli, p. 136.

²⁴⁴ Celant 1998, p. 220.

soaked in kaolin and glue.” With mechanical precision, he counters the manual technique with a technological one in the very next sentence: “In 1959 the seams of Achromes consisted of machine stitching.”²⁴⁵ Hand and machine, cotton and polystyrene, straw and plastic, natural and artificial fibers. Technique and above all materials come to signify an encounter of opposites. What emerges is a set of oppositions between the twin realms of organicity and syntheticity in which traditional boundaries between the natural and the artificial begin to break down. Here as elsewhere in Manzoni’s oeuvre, organic signifiers are permitted only if they enter into a dialectical relation with the order of the synthetic.

This dynamic opposition occurs not only on the levels of material and technique, but inevitably on the level of form as well, in a cultural debate in Italy that went beyond Manzoni. A battle between geometric and organic form raged in Milanese art circles of the 50’s, with the neoconstructivist Concretists (MAC) standing on one side, and the Informel groups like the Nuclearists on the other.²⁴⁶ In 1962, it was precisely this divide that structured Italo Calvino’s theory of the avant-garde, which parsed all aesthetic tendencies into two opposed groups: the *rationalist* line, which included all Enlightenment projects of high modernism that sought to improve life on the basis of

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 223.

²⁴⁶ Across the Atlantic, this opposition would also turn out be a major concern for Minimal and Conceptual artists throughout the sixties. Describing cubes and spheres, Donald Judd told Lucy Lippard in 1967, “The main virtue of geometric shapes is that they are not organic, as all art otherwise is. A form that’s neither geometric nor organic would be a great discovery.” While Judd may have yearned for the middle-ground of a neither-nor, Manzoni’s material forms demonstrate the inextricability of the both-and, the entwinement of organic and synthetic that characterizes all material production under the conditions of advanced industrial capitalism. Donald Judd in Lucy Lippard, “Homage to the Square,” *Art in America* (July-August, 1967), pp. 50-57. Quoted in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October*, Vol. 55 (Winter, 1990), p. 130.

reason, versus the *visceral* line, which included all Romantic projects of aestheticism that sought to escape the rigors of industrial instrumentality.²⁴⁷ For Calvino, these terms could account for virtually all the artistic and literary practice of the modern period. Forever at war with one another, sensuously embodied viscosity and geometrically cognitive rationality constellated a convincingly totalizing binary for Italian cultural practitioners of the era. For Manzoni, however, both terms become inextricably enmeshed.



Figure 48. Piero Manzoni. *Achrome*. 1961

²⁴⁷ Italo Calvino, “La Sfida al labirinto,” *Il Menabò* 5 (Torino: Einaudi 1962), pp. 82-97.



Figure 49. Piero Manzoni. *Achrome*. 1961

Take, for example, two of Manzoni's strangest works. On his second trip to Herning in 1961, he produced two *Achromes* made entirely of organic, even rustic materials: one of straw and wood and the other, uniquely, of rabbit fur and wood (Fig. 48, 49). Standing on a base of carbonized lumber, the straw has been doused in kaolin and shaped into a vertical parallelepiped. It is a three-dimensional complement to the rectangular straw achrome paintings of this same period, in which allover composition and dynamically intersecting graphemes cede their liberatory AbEx pretensions to the factual banality of randomness. In the other sculpture, a rabbit skin has been stretched over some interior support in the shape of a ball resting on a cubic black base. Since both are composed of a sculpture-and-pedestal pairing, these works continue Manzoni's investigation of in the sculptural plinth in dialogue with both the legacy of Brancusi and

Manzoni's own Living Sculpture-Magic Base series. In the shapes of classic stereometric solids, they are certainly sculptural, but by virtue of their titles and their whiteness, they draw a relationship between monochromatic painting and modernist sculpture. Having evolved out of Manzoni's *Achrome* painting practice, these objects trouble the dividing line between conventional mediums and compel the category *Achrome* to encompass both painting and sculpture, as indeed many of Manzoni's late objects do. Of course, any of the kaolin *Achromes*, with their folded surfaces and resolute opacity, could be said to perform the same kind of post-Greenbergian critique of medium-specificity (not to mention transcendental opticality), but there is another much more difficult set of oppositions at stake in these works. For we find in these two *Achromes* a curious paradox: natural materials taking on a distinctly antinaturalist form.

The rabbit pelt, the "real" fur which might initially suggest a riposte to the endless "hairy canvases" of artificial fur, is forced to perform a perfect sphere. We have moved from living sculpture to dead mammal, but on Manzoni's base, animal remains assume the geometric precision of a ball bearing.²⁴⁸ In both of these strange sculptural *Achromes* from Herning, in fact, an organic material redolent of rural agricultural traditions is transduced into an ostentatiously rational geometry: fur as sphere, straw as prism. Both are offered up on bases of charred wood like a sacrificial immolation. The rabbit-sphere, for example, rests just off-center on a blackened cube, itself composed of smaller cubes in a three-dimensional grid of 8 x 8 x 8. Rough-hewn modernist as it is, this is the most

²⁴⁸ It is also worth comparing this perfectly processed hide to the taxidermy in Rauschenberg. In works like *Canyon* (1959) and *Monogram* (1955-59)—the latter of which appeared in Manzoni's short-lived magazine *Azimuth*—feathers and fur retain the naturalist morphologies of the animals from which they are derived. Inflected with folksy rural American associations that are simultaneously banal and bizarre, Rauschenberg's animals straddle the gap between a naturalist painterly past and the denaturalized future figured with such crystalline precision in Manzoni.

Brancusian of all Manzoni's Bases. When Manzoni takes up taxidermy and wood-craft, however, all the pleasant peasantry is burned away, leaving behind only the icy weirdness of pure geometry: the circle and the square, the sphere and the cube, a spherical perfection on the order of the grid. But embodied by signifiers of the natural, and frequently in a state of charred ruination, these purist forms are deprived of their enlightenment promise and certainly of any transcendental aspirations. The thing on the pedestal is offered up as an object of visual delectation and categorical redefinition, and is thereby denaturalized. Just as the signed woman's body, no longer the visual signifier of the subject nor even the mystic vessel for allegorical truths, is brutishly objectified as a commodity, so too will other organicities disintegrate into their synthetic opposites.

The same could be said of virtually all of the other *Achromes* as well, particularly after 1960. Over and over again, signifiers of the organic, taken here to include artisanal or (so-called) naturally-occurring materials, are organized according to the most rigorously rationalist schemas. Traditional Italian breakfast rolls file in along the axes of a grid, and cotton makes appearances as gridded cylinders and rectangles. Conversely, and perhaps most crucially, the most unabashedly synthetic materials find themselves playing distinctly organicist roles: miming mammalian hides, for example, or wearing decomposed and decaying surfaces. Styrofoam rectangles become rotten and bruléed. Nylon and glass-wool fibers curl out from the wall like the swatch of some obtuse wig. Even polystyrene balls are induced to pullulate like insect-eggs or milk bubbles, multiplying with a cellular whiteness that recalls Kusama's *Accumulations*, also of 1962.

The morphological pairing of sphere and ovoid is also key in this connection. It works in both directions for the egg, which comes in both natural (*Uova*) and artificial

(*Placentarium*) materials. A giant plastic balloon comes to resemble an egg, while the quotidian chicken-egg, in its ellipsoid serenity, comes to resemble the biomorphic design objects for which it allegedly served as inspiration. The sphere, on the other hand, was historically and for the Manzoni's contemporaries a leading signifier of geometric abstraction. The 1953 "Definition of the Nuclearists," for example, mocked the fetishization of spheres in neoconstructivist mannerism: "Yet again the discovery was made...of the perfect sphericity of a sphere."²⁴⁹ If a perfect sphere invokes geometry and an ovoid invokes biomorphism, it is instructive to note that these two shapes are constantly changing places throughout Manzoni's work: the egg-ovoid marked with the thumb-ellipse is also the shape of the plastic shell of the *Placentarium*, which is sometimes also a sphere, the same shape as the rabbit fur, not to mention the perfectly round *Bodies of Air* and *Artist's Breath*, which are sometimes also ovoids of synthetic rubber.

Manzoni framed many of these works, especially the *Corpo d'aria*, in a manner that insistently transgresses the erstwhile certain boundaries of ovoid and sphere, organicism and geometricity. One should begin with the titles, *Bodies of Air*, in which even perfect white spheres assume corporeal associations. But as mentioned in the previous chapter, the *Corpi* were also featured in a *Filmgiornale* short in 1960 in which their tumescent forms are brought into visual and verbal connection with the pneumatic body of a female model. Set in the dubious context of a sleek modern Milanese interior, surrounded by domestic design objects like a coffee table, credenza, and lamp, the film of the *Corpi* sets a sphere next to an oval like a perfect pair, even calling them "sisters."

²⁴⁹ Beniamino dal Fabbro, "Definition of Nuclear Art," in Arturo Schwarz, *Nuclear Art*, (Milano: M. Maestro, 1962), p. 206.

Manzoni had initially wanted his Achromes to mount a refusal: of color, of form, of illusion, of transcendence, let alone of mass culture. Neither a screen for shadows (Rauschenberg) nor a portal to the beyond (Klein), neither painterly reduction to the primaries (Rodchenko, Newman) nor geometric tautology dressed in numinous rhetoric (Malevich), the early kaolin Achromes negate an entire range of blessings traditionally attributed to the monochrome. Their chalky opacity hardens the surface of the canvas into a carapace. The material support, soaked in white liquid, dries out into a husk, an obdurate shell of its forbears that fends off any transcendental projections. Despite the occasional positivity of its rhetoric, the monochrome had been essentially a negative tradition, a tradition of subtraction and reduction, of purification and minimization. Manzoni's Achromes attacked this tradition, exposing its ossification and failure by negating even that last positive aspect, chroma, with which the monochrome articulated its negations. The negation of the negation concretizes the painting as object, thereby returning it to the world of things from which it had sought to flee. The surface thus concretized must inevitably confront its condition as composition, no longer formal but instead material, and look to the historical state of the object-world of which it is part. In this way the Achromes would necessarily also (like Manzoni's more directly corporeal works) confront the inescapability of the commodity-form and its vivaciously uncanny ubiquity in daily life, not through its image, like Manzoni's Pop contemporaries, but rather through its materiality, its compositional order, and the mode of its execution. That these works simultaneously appeal to the dynamic structures of organic life will have crucial consequences for Manzoni's work as a whole.

Synthetic Swarms, Faux Furs, and the Light of Unreason

After balloons and eggs, in 1962 Manzoni began to work with another set of white round objects: tiny polystyrene balls (Fig. 50). These miniscule spheres of expanded polystyrene foam are normally used as packing material or as stuffing for consumer goods, but here they seethe across the surface of the canvas with energetic luminosity. Their distribution across the plane is random and irrational and yet ultimately even in its overall coverage. The balls cluster in little clumps that produce an all-over texture of lights and shadows from a distance, but which up close reveal a variety of sizes and shapes for these little pellets. Some are larger in size than others, and though most



Figure 50. Piero Manzoni. *Achrome* (detail). 1962

combination situated somewhere between the undoing of structural logic associated with

are nearly-spherical, some are oblong or misshapen as well. They are all fixed in a white soup of kaolin, occasionally assisted by some thermoplastic glue.

David Joselit has called this type of accumulation a *swarm*, which he identifies in the works of a number of artists in the 1950's and 60's, such as Yayoi Kusama, Marcel Broodthaers, and Eva Hesse, among others.

For Joselit, the swarm is “a principle of

Bataille's *informe* and the rule-based permutations of Minimalism.”²⁵⁰ Joselit's brief passage on the swarm draws on Deleuzian imagery (“an emergent order that arises out of immanent flows of matter”) and new conceptions of the so-called “hive mind” observed in digital culture (“it is both unconscious and ordered, like a bee-hive or an anthill”).²⁵¹ But swarms manage these divergent claims by adopting a visual-verbal trope from the natural world: the buzzing proliferation of organic bodies, the infinite multiplication of locusts, birds, or bees that threaten to spread, overwhelm, and devour. The clusterings of polystyrene balls, particularly of subtly different sizes, invokes precisely this kind of dynamism, a swarming menace that appears almost to move before our eyes. “Pullulation” is the word I used to describe these formations earlier, calling to mind fizzing milk bubbles or a nest of insect eggs just erupting into life, the popping proliferation of small things that threatens to increase ad infinitum.

Not only artificial foams but artificial furs begin sprouting out of a series of works in this period, a category of Achromes that Manzoni called his “hairy canvases” (Fig. 51). In a letter to Henk Peeters from the fall of 1961, Manzoni tells his friend, “I have stopped the paintings of cotton-wool [in order] to make paintings with long hair (a few centimeters). I use different fibers and also (it might interest you) fibers of nylon, which are sold already-treated with an antistatic oil.”²⁵² In this missive, an epistolary communication between two working artists begins to assume the verbiage of commodity advertisement. Out with the old growth of vegetal fibers, and in with the new wave of synthetic hairs. *Basta* the naturalism of bygone days, and *ecco* the conveniences of the

²⁵⁰ David Joselit, “Molds and Swarms,” in Molesworth, *Part Object Part Sculpture*, p. 164.

²⁵¹ *ibid.* p. 164.

²⁵² Battino and Palazzoli, p. 136.

new consumer products. Manzoni hawks this painting made of plastic filaments, pre-treated to avoid the pesky problems of static cling. He even links this new commodity to the identitarian suturing of his addressee: “this might interest you...” as if the brand-new product had already anticipated the desires of its consumer.



Figure 51. Piero Manzoni. Achrome. 1961

Although many of Manzoni’s works could be said to operate as withdrawal and negation, in the “hairy canvases,” whiteness takes on an aggressive positivity. In shimmering tufts or raging clouds, the white of these Achromes is neither the signifier of absence nor the paleness of an ossified tradition. It is the chemical gleam of Clorox. Its whiteness is uncanny in its perfection, ostentatiously unnatural. And yet, as its fibers squeal out obscenely from their supports, the piece takes on a creaturely animism. A

photograph by Giovanni Ricci of 1961 shows Manzoni standing in front of a tower of fiberglass (no longer extant) that reaches chest-height.²⁵³ Its fluffy surface (if we can call such topographic complexity a surface at all) is all the more disturbing for its size. In the photograph, it looks like some abstract beast in the process of devouring its creator. Most of these paintings are contained in box-frame constructions lined in red or blue velvet, and yet their synthetic fibers appear all the brighter for the colored matting against which it is set, and all the wilder for the boxy frames in which it is caged. These are dangerous paintings; they must remain penned up.

The entire structure of the hairy canvases—from visible fibers, to binding agent, to unseen support—is of some variety of synthetic material.²⁵⁴ Manzoni made these works by poking a grid of holes in a polystyrene rectangle. He then cut glass wool or nylon into tufts, which could be pulled through the holes and glued with polyvinyl-acetate thermoplastic at the back. Nylon is of course another variety of plastic, but glass wool is composed of machined silicate, long strands of manmade glass known as synthetic vitreous fibers. These filaments, also used to insulate houses, are closely associated with plastics because it is these that reinforce the polyester in the hybrid glass-and-plastic material that also (if misleadingly) goes by the name “fiberglass.” The fibers are not synthetic resin but rather synthetic glass, as though providing an industrially

²⁵³ Celant 2004, p. 332.

²⁵⁴ Lydia Beerkens, “A Contemporary Cleaning Controversy,” in *Modern Art: Who Cares? An interdisciplinary research project and an international symposium on the conservation of modern and contemporary art*, Usbrand Hummeln and Dionne Sillé, eds. (Amsterdam: The Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art and the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999), unpaginated.

achromatic counterpoint to the Italian tradition of artisanal glass-production in Murano and Venice, known internationally for vibrant colors and hand-blown craftsmanship.²⁵⁵

The effect, as the hairs blossom out of each hole, is an all-over composition that drifts outward in three dimensions. The larger works retain the vague morphology of the rectangle, but in smaller versions the fibers pop into energetic little starbursts. Over time, the weight of gravity tends to pull on the fiberglass, leaving some in a state of mournful drooping. Others have become permanently discolored by dust, making them look, as a curator at the Kröller-Müller Museum once put it, “as gray as a Dutch cloud.”²⁵⁶ The lining, which covers all five interior surfaces of the box-frame, is either a deep red or blue in flannel and sometimes velveteen cotton.²⁵⁷ These deeply-saturated colors, along with the soft pile of their fabrics, absorb light and disrupt depth-perception such that the white hair bristles out from within a darkling void. But how humorous to note that in the very technique of their construction, beneath all this anarchic acompositionality, the order of the grid lies smothered.

Other Achromes in the “hairy canvas” category are composed of short nylon or polyester fur, like the pelt of a stuffed animal. If the long-stranded fiberglass works recall the ripped-out stuffing of insulation and upholstery, these more demure canvases present the hide of a bleached teddy-bear in neat geometric swatches. The majority of

²⁵⁵ These traditional glass-manufacturing techniques remained strong throughout the 50’s, and continues to this day. See Penny Sparke, *Italian Design: 1870 to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 103-104.

²⁵⁶ quoted in Beerkens, “Contemporary Cleaning Controversy,” unpaginated.

²⁵⁷ Though the acrylic boxes for many of the hairy canvases were constructed after the fact (and in some cases after Manzoni’s death), the artist did work closely with the Milan frame-artisan Carlo Rampinelli to construct the white wooden box-frames, lined in colored fabric and faced with Perspex. Author’s interview with Rampinelli, March 2013.

these pieces display a machine-stitched horizontal seam, thereby cleaving the fuzzy surface into two identical rectangles. The actual chemical composition of these artificial hairs could be any one of a number of plastics that are used for faux furs. Like all plastics, the very multiplicity of their chemical variations induces a certain obscurity of their precise composition, such that they usually come to be grouped under the heading that emphasizes their difference from organic materials. They are called simply “synthetic fibers.”²⁵⁸

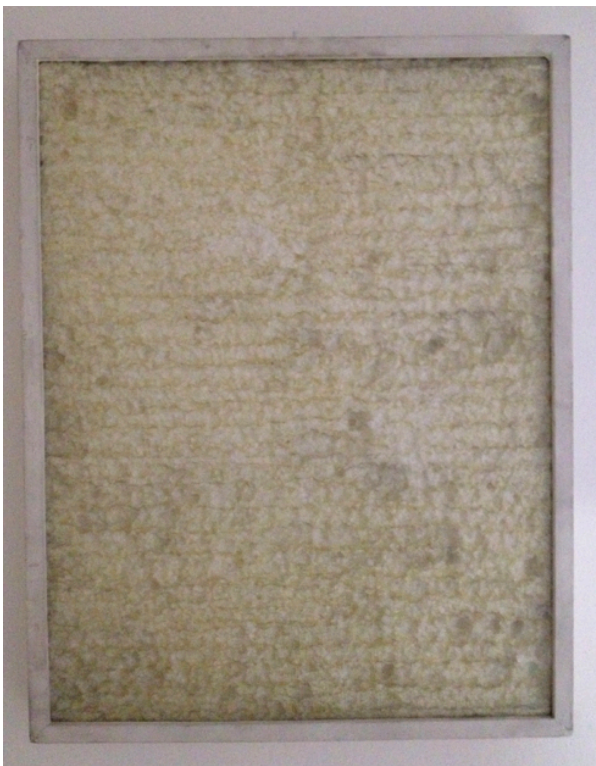


Figure 52. Piero Manzoni. Achrome. 1961-62

The support structure for many of the hairy canvases—polystyrene rectangles—also served as works in themselves. A whole category of Achromes consists simply of framed slabs of Styrofoam. Perhaps the first example of these, from 1960, features a grid

²⁵⁸ This terminology is used in virtually every single Manzoni exhibition catalogue that includes these works.

of expanded polystyrene blocks stacked on top of one another. The blocks are actually four oblong horizontal bricks with vertical lines scored in each to suggest the warp and weft of square gridding. Afterward, it seems, Manzoni was far more likely to work with single slabs of the plastic foam, but he would continue to manipulate its surface (Fig. 52). In parallel horizontal lines, the faces of these Achromes have been scraped away, producing a texture which, though serially striated, is also ragged with pockmarks. Burrs curl up along the edges of these scratched ditches, and in places whole chunks have been torn away. To call these surfaces “rough,” or “uneven” would be a grave understatement. The rhythm of horizontal geometricity invoked by the striations is continually undone by the unpredictability of their texture, a consequence of the material properties of the Styrofoam itself as it is scraped.

Some lack striations altogether, and yet still the smooth surface of Styrofoam has been destroyed. If today we associate Styrofoam with a kind of toxic immortality, these Achromes seem to have accelerated the process of their long decay. They look rotten and worm-eaten, like leprous flesh or the bark of an old tree. In their manifest decrepitude, all the numinous purity of the monochrome withers away. But if the rough surface of some might at first seem to play Alberto Burri’s game—reclaiming plastic for an organic deliquescence—the linear striations and gridding of the others intrude with machinic precision, thus heralding the mutual entwinement of organic and synthetic.

These plastic slabs also harbor a secret. Most, if not all, have been treated with a phosphorescent chemical that soaks in ambient light, so the piece literally glows in the dark. Manzoni experimented with several varieties of phosphorescent chemical, some of which work better than others. The chemicals may even account for the bruléed surface

of some of the works, as though some noxious agent had burned off the top layer. The structure of expanded polystyrene is cellular, composed as it is of puffed pellets of air and plastic that are heated and pressed together. If it comes in contact with harsh chemicals, the plastic melts and the cells collapse, leaving a scarred and lumpy crust.

In the crevices, a pallid green oozes out from among all the whiteness. Switch off the lights, and an achromatic work of aesthetic withdrawal transforms into a fluorescent green trinket. A work that by day engages in critical discourse with the history of monochromy—the nadir of painterly ascetism—by night suddenly glows out weirdly, coarsely, cheaply. The uncanny presence of spectacle haunts even here, in the most advanced form of critical negation, only revealing itself in the shadows of the night.

Indeed, if the Achrome series initially embraced aesthetic withdrawal in the age of spectacle's triumph, Manzoni's phosphorescent Achromes play all sorts of games with light, visibility, and transparency. The largest phosphorescent polystyrene piece (one of the largest of all Manzoni works) was installed as a window in Aage Damgaard's Black Factory in Herning, the shirt and textile manufacturing plant where Manzoni first produced many synthetic works. The material is obviously opaque, and therefore—like Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* of 1920—the piece invokes the Albertian window-on-the-world, the *ur-episteme* of Western easel painting, only immediately to block it, both literally and figuratively.²⁵⁹ *Fresh Widow* is a little maquette of a French window standing on a base; its panes are of black leather. Manzoni's window, equally impenetrable, actually usurps the place of a functional aperture in the cafeteria of the Angli Shirt Factory. In place of a glass diaphane that once offered sunlight and a view of the landscape, the workers of the shirt factory are confronted with an obdurate block of

²⁵⁹ I borrow the term *ur-episteme* in this connection from Benjamin Buchloh.

Styrofoam. In sardonic recompense for the light that it steals from these laborers on break, the piece emanates a sickly luminosity after they have left for the night.²⁶⁰

The phosphorescent canvases give off light, but the object of the piece is neither the light itself nor even a machine for projecting it (like Otto Piene's *Light Ballets*, for example). As always with Manzoni, even the most evanescent of immaterialities finds itself a material substrate. Soaked into the pocked and wasted body of polystyrene, its chemical compound gives off just enough light to make itself visible under darkness. The piece glows, to be sure, but it illuminates nothing other than its own destitute facticity. Stripped of (spiritual) projection and (intellectual) illumination, this is light without enlightenment.

A crucial aspect of this glowing plastic is that it is responsive to its environment. Like a nocturnal organism, it takes energy from the sun, and slowly releases it at night.²⁶¹ Phosphorescent chemicals are distinguished from their fluorescent cousins precisely by this delayed temporality; rather than immediately beaming light back into the world, phosphorescents store up ambient light and release it slowly over time. These are part of a whole set of Manzoni Achromes that alter their appearance according to environmental conditions, as in a number of works treated with cobalt chloride, a chemical that shifts

²⁶⁰ Another plastic work from Herning performs the opposite operation. Though perfectly transparent, it is hung on the wall. Composed of two panes of acrylic glued together, this achrome abjures not only color but even whiteness. Its two-columned grid of squares also recalls *Fresh Widow*, and yet this window allows us to see through it only to offer a view of the wall immediately behind it. The work fulfills Buchloh's trajectory for conceptual works in condensed form: an absolute tautology (gridded surface) that rebounds out to contextuality (architectural support). The grid plots out the expanse of the work itself as well as the precise dimensions of the wall as framed through its plastic. See Alberro et al., "Conceptual Art and the Reception of Duchamp," pp. 136-137.

²⁶¹ This was a key aspect of the artificial organism that Manzoni dreamed of creating, about which more below.

from blue to pink depending on the humidity. Manzoni saturated cotton squares in the chemical or covered canvases in its salts. Anhydrous cobalt chloride is blue, but it changes to pink as it absorbs water molecules from the surrounding air, a property of the compound called “hygroscopy” which is particularly strong in the salts.²⁶² Both the phosphorescent plastic and hygroscopic chemicals are works compelled to respond to the circumstances of their exhibition; the former to conditions of light, the latter to conditions of humidity.²⁶³

An orientation toward thermodynamic contextuality is an aspect Manzoni shared with a young Hans Haacke in the sixties, well-known for his *Condensation Cube* (1963-65) and *Grass Cube* (1967). The changes in these works occur with or without the participation of the viewer, but the number of viewers in the gallery space will of course significantly affect the levels of humidity or carbon dioxide, and therefore catalyze change in the work. Even if these changes are made visible by a shift in chroma or the slow growth of vegetation, the “viewer’s” principle mode of interaction with the piece is displaced from vision to another, less cognitive modality. The viewer’s bodies—a respiring, sweating, belching mass—become the energy source for the piece: the body as the battery. These pieces feed off their participants’ body heat and effluent, indifferent to

²⁶² For more on cobalt salts and hygroscopic phenomena, see V.D. Daniels and S.E. Wilthew, “An Investigation into the Use of Cobalt Salt Impregnated Papers for the Measurement of Relative Humidity,” *Studies in Conservation*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (May, 1983), pp. 80-84.

²⁶³ It seems that many of the lines also respond to the light. The tubes, as Manzoni insisted often and emphatically, must remain closed. Since many appear to have been executed on photosensitive paper, if they were to be opened the roll of paper bearing the line would begin to change color, thus obscuring the line. Manzoni suggests as much in an unpublished letter to Otto Piene written from Albisola just after an exhibition of *Linee*. “la ligne est en papier que change avec la lumière.” Manzoni correspondence, Otto Piene Archive. Manzoni’s claim is borne out by two pieces in the Archivio Manzoni in Milan: an opened line, whose marked surface has begun to turn from white to aubergine, and an unused roll of paper that has completely changed color on its interior face.

their presence but perfectly happy to exploit their bodily functions. The shifting herd of human bodies is inscribed in these works as just another set of variables in a thermodynamic system that equally includes nonhuman factors like gallery lights and weather. Even as the art object takes on aspects of uncanny life, the viewer-participant is reduced to a corporeal instrument.

Plastics: Ancient History, Modern Design

Manzoni used a variety of artificial materials—nylon, acrylic, polystyrene—most of which fall into the category of plastic. *Plastic* is a general term for a wide range of compounds, the vast majority of which did not exist anywhere on earth before the First World War. How do we situate plastics historically for Manzoni? What might plastic have meant in Milan of 1960? What sort of artistic, historical, and cultural contexts might have structured the set of associations triggered by plastic material in this specific time and place?

The usage of synthetic materials in modern works of art was of course not especially new. Synthetic materials and chemicals had always served indispensable functions in the apparatus of photography and film, for example, and were occasionally used, often in experimental form, as media for sculpture. In the prewar period, new materials in general were a hallmark of technophilic progressivism in the great utopian design movements like Soviet Constructivism and the Bauhaus, albeit better known for plywood, glass, and steel than for plastics. For these committed Enlightenment proselytes, newly synthesized materials could testify to the benefits of modern industry,

and their design application on a grand scale held both the promise and the likelihood of a more egalitarian world. New materials signified new possibilities for the socialist future that was never to arrive.

The prewar artist most closely associated with plastics is Naum Gabo. His constructivist sculptures balanced forms in three-dimensional acrylic whose technological novelty and gleaming transparency amplified all the utopian dreams implicit in their geometric harmonies. Infused with technophilic optimism, Gabo's works articulated a vision of a future world with material and formal clarity, and yet his works' aestheticization of constructivist form immediately gave the lie to that vision. How poignant therefore that in the intervening years, these works have fallen into ruin: the brave new materials of which they were made proved as fragile as the utopian hopes that inspired them.

The constructivist legacy was particularly strong in Milan, where in the early fifties the Concretist group Movimento Arte Concreta (MAC) gathered around Bruno Munari, ex-latterday Futurist and future pioneer of industrial design. Here too, plastics embodied the affirmative spirit of technoscientific rationalism, as exemplified in *Struttura Celiporto* (1952) by Regina Prassede Cassolo Bracchi (known simply as Regina). From a flat wooden base, halved by a dynamically diagonal black triangle, a construction of delicate metal rods rises to support geometric wings of translucent green plastic. The light passing through the plastic projects its angular image onto the unfinished wooden base, just as the edges of the wings fluoresce with soaring lucidity. Moving up from wood to metal to plastic, the work enacts its own technological evolution while simultaneously adumbrating a movement from isolated art objects to

architectural environments, since its wings look as if they are about to fledge from their sculptural perch into the expanded field of design.

Plastic materials also played a major role in works whose organic form militated specifically against the rationalities of the Concretists. In fact, the artist most closely associated with plastic materials in Manzoni's day was Alberto Burri, who began to include polymers of various kinds in his assemblages of the 1950's, often mixed with burlap and oil paint. He would go on to make a series called *Plastiche*, and his best-known *Combustions* are of melted red plastic. Burri, who had been a medic during WWII, was closely associated with Informel artists of the 50's, and his compositions, even when they explicitly name the synthetic material of which they are made, never quite escape the aesthetic and ideological associations of that generation. Their surfaces, particularly in red, frequently call to mind flayed skin, and they invariably retain the punctual hole—the glimpse into the existential void—common to Nuclear and Informel artists alike. In fact, many of his plastic combustions, with their burned-out red roundels set against black, embrace the same chromatic contrast and compositional arrangement as Manzoni's tar paintings of late 1957, only with colors reversed. Burri insisted on their formal qualities ("Form and space! The end. There is nothing else," he declared near the end of his life) with the same force that Manzoni rejected formalism.²⁶⁴ Setting plastic alight with an elemental technophobia, his melting polymers reclaim the material from its constructivist legacy for a formal organicity, all while subjecting the monochrome to a level of assault that Fontana's *Taglie* and *Bucchi*—decorous and gentile by comparison—never achieved.

²⁶⁴ Jaimey Hamilton, "Making Art Matter: Alberto Burri's *Sacchi*," *October* 124 (Spring 2008), p. 31.

Manzoni's use of synthetic materials are situated at a distance from both of these positions, citing both the traumatic conflagrations of the past and the techno-scientific fervor of the future, while voiding the former of any existential romanticism and the latter of its amnesiac affirmation. He realized, at the dawn of the sixties, that an artist would need to abandon both the dolorous organicism of Informel, whose activities in Italy (as elsewhere) continued long after the window of their historical relevance closed, and the technophilic neoconstructivism of MAC, which had disbanded in 1958 so that its members, many of whom were already architects and engineers, could pursue careers in the surging field of Italian design.²⁶⁵

By the time Manzoni began to experiment with it, plastic had begun to disclose the effects it would have on modern life of the postwar era. Plastic consumer objects of all kinds began proliferating in Milanese households, and plastic materials, no longer experimental but perfectly utilitarian, could become product wrapping, medical equipment, packing material. Manzoni differed from his contemporaries especially here, in the range of different plastics that he used: not only the materials instantly recognizable as plastic, like cellophane or acrylic, but also nylon and polystyrene, plastics with a diverse variety of textures and dimensions.

The classic text on plastic is Barthes' essay from 1957. "Despite having the names of Greek shepherds (Polystyrene, Polyvinyl, Polyethylene)," quips the writer, "plastic...is in essence the stuff of alchemy."²⁶⁶ Barthes' citation of arcadian antiquity is deeply ironic, given the synthetic modernity of this new substance plastic, whose

²⁶⁵ Renata Ghiazza, "From Abstract-Concrete to Concrete," in *Il Modo Italiano: Italian Design and Avant-Garde in the 20th Century* (Milano: Skira 2006), p. 67.

²⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 97.

scientific artifice marks a definitive cut with any classical continuities or idyllic returns. He calls plastics a magic substance, associating its changeling powers with alchemy, transmutation, and the miraculous. “More than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation...and it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature.”²⁶⁷ Plastic can assume any shape, take the form of any object, and therefore performs a transubstantiation which, though belonging to the divine, submits to profane itself by the commonality of its appearances. Barthes writes (in one of the more memorable phrases of the piece), “[Plastic] is the first magical substance which consents to be prosaic.” As a miracle, plastic must necessarily transform nature, and indeed plastic heralds a complete transmutation not only of natural materials to synthetic objects, but even the transformation of Nature itself. For Barthes, the divine properties of polymorph plastics carry a Pandoran threat capable of altering nature beyond recognition, a denaturalization of literally global proportions. Indeed, the more sophisticated these synthetics become and the further they fly into the realm of the artificial, their trajectory crosses over into its opposite, doubling back into the natural world to touch even organic life. Barthes ends with these lines: “The whole world can be plasticized, and even life itself since, we are told, they are beginning to make plastic aortas.”²⁶⁸

The paradox at play here is implicit in the plastics themselves, in their very molecular structure. Any plastics textbook will tell you that horn and amber both technically qualify as “plastics,” but what we really mean by the word are *synthetic resins*, the moldable materials artificially created in labs and factories. Chemically

²⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 97.

²⁶⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 99.

speaking, plastics are also synthetic *polymers*: long chains of identical molecules (monomers) linked together along a spine of carbon atoms.²⁶⁹ The units for these polymer chains are derived from hydrocarbons, that is, from coal, natural gas, and above all petroleum. The material history of plastic molecules is therefore a long one, having begun as organic life forms most likely in the carboniferous era, some 360 million years ago. Accumulated in mass graves, the carcasses of these organisms were heated and squeezed by titanic forces across the eons. Both time and geologic stress—factors simultaneously natural and *inorganic*—slowly transformed their rotted bodies into a slick black liquid fossil. People pump it from the ground, whence this black gold is dispatched through a labyrinth of tubes where machines process it into the fuels that power the modern world. The leftover stuff, the byproducts of this ancient planetary project, get turned into plastic.

Alain Resnais' astonishing short film "Le Chant du styrène"—made in the very same year as Barthes' text—traces this trajectory in reverse, following the material history of a polystyrene bowl back through its production process to the petroleum plant, and finally to the prehistoric organisms from which it is derived.²⁷⁰ The rhyming narration written by novelist and poet Raymond Queneau explains the numerous techniques by which plastic can be shaped: injection, extrusion, vacuum-formation. We follow the polystyrene back through a thermal mold to machines full of glittering pellets in green, yellow, blue, and red. "On the vibrating sieve the granules swarm, proud of

²⁶⁹ Pasquale Alferj and Francesca Cernia, *Gli anni di plastica* (Milano: Electa Editrice, 1983), pp. 31-40.

²⁷⁰ Alain Resnais, *Le Chant du styrène*, (Société Pechiney, 1958), 14:00, available in The Criterion Collection on HuluPlus, <http://www.hulu.com/le-chant-du-styrne>, accessed Dec 1, 2013. All quotations are taken from the subtitles to this film.

their colors, lively and warm.” Before this they were rods, long spaghetti-strands of plastic, before which they took a form that the narrator calls “sausage,” a lumpy excretory substance made from the mixture of polystyrene powder and pigments. The film then follows the powder back through the drying process to the machines where simple styrene is catalyzed into a heavy molecular chain, the polymer called polystyrene. Once we reach this point in the reverse-engineering process, to a man in workclothes staring down into a giant vat of liquid styrene, the narrator will issue repeated warnings, in cutely rhyming couplets, that the material is highly combustible and might at any moment explode and kill us all.

Then follows a lengthy sequence of tracking shots of pipes and tubes. Innumerable, polymorphous, seemingly infinite in number and complexity, the pipes pass before the camera as the narrator builds suspense as to the secret origin of all these chemicals: “Pipe by pipe we return to the source, through a desert of channels running their course, to the raw material, as yet unrevealed, endlessly flowing, potent, concealed.” After another warning of explosion, the origin is finally disclosed: “They’re extracted from the magic elixir called oil, found from Bordeaux to Africa’s soil.” Petroleum and coal too, claims the film, whose origins both lie in antediluvian organisms: “Is oil what fossilized fish became? No one quite knows. For coal it’s the same. For oil, is plankton part of the chain? The origin’s obscure. Controversies remain.” In this way Resnais’ film and Queneau’s poetry follow a polystyrene bowl back through its fossil-fuel raw materials to its prehistoric beginnings. Over millennia, organic life is transubstantiated into a magic black elixir that conjures in turn the most synthetic material of all: plastic.

It is the pipes that are probably the most salient feature of the film: endless ducts and passages, frequently in garish colors and framed against the sky. These same systems of polychrome piping feature prominently in Michelangelo Antonioni's first color feature *Deserto Rosso* (1964), in which Monica Vitti, distraught and running sideways as usual, wanders through a maze of pipes at her husband's petrochemical factory. Their candy colors and tubular forms also worm their way into the couple's home: a blue banister, a deceitful child's toys.²⁷¹ The entire film is set in an industrial wasteland of blackish puddles, dead fish, and desolate earth.

But beyond the pipes, the first sequences of "Le Chant du styrène" are the most significant, especially in that they bind the organic-synthetic binary into a colorful visual conundrum. Against a taunted score of tympanum and whining oboes, bizarre plants sprout before our eyes. Vaguely resembling reeds or corals or anemones, the germinations are all of plastic objects in kaleidoscope colors. Some are inflated like balloons, rising in front of our eyes like time-lapse photography of germinating vegetal life. They resemble nothing so closely as Karl Blossfeldt's plant photography (dating from the 1910's, first published in the 1930's) in which closeups of shoots and tendrils make vegetation into the apparatus of industry, a sort of visual aporia between nature and machine. In Resnais' film, these plastic plants are followed by white plastic squares, transparent containers, scientific vials, molded refrigerator interiors, tennis raquets, sippy cups—in short, a metonymic sequence of the infinitude of plastic commodities and applications. All this is set against a black backdrop with floating red and blue geometric shapes, whose resolution, just out of focus, anticipate by several years the "phloo" forms

²⁷¹ The mechanical sublime of petroleum processing continues to occupy artists like Edward Burtynsky to this day.

that will lurk in the background of Richard Hamilton's paintings of sleek modern design objects.

Indeed, as this metonymic montage reminds us, it is not possible to speak of plastic circa 1960 without also speaking of design. Plastics are themselves the fruits of a design process. Engineered rearrangements at the molecular level, they are conceived on the page, tested in the lab, and finally born at the factory. From the products of design to the design of products, these protean materials then take the shape of consumer commodity culture and its infinitude of objects. Designed from the molecule up, synthetic polymers are both literally and figuratively the very stuff of a totally designed world. By 1960, plastics were already ubiquitous at every level of design culture, from cheap household items to high-end furniture. Indeed it was in plastic that the contemporary notion of design began to articulate itself, and it was in in design (far more than in an avant-garde) that plastic worked its transubstantial magic.

It was in Milan, in fact, where advanced polymers and modern design became most completely fused. Signifying modernity itself in a rapidly industrializing country, plastics in a variety of forms would come to play a pivotal role in postwar Italian industrial design and the Italian economy at large. Plastic products, along with the petrochemicals from which they are derived, became leading exports of the Italian reconstruction and *miracolo* years. Between 1951 and 1961, for example, the production of plastic goods and materials increased by a factor of fifteen.²⁷² At the end of the same period, Italy exported a staggering fifty-five times more plastic than it had at the

²⁷² Andrea Branzi, "Italian Design and the Complexity of Modernity," in Celant, *The Italian Metamorphosis*, p. 603; Ginzborg, *History of Contemporary Italy*, p. 215. See also the staggering statistics in Gianpiero Bosoni's "The Italian Way to Plastics," in *The Plastics Age: From Bakelite to Beanbags and Beyond*, ed. Penny Sparke (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1992), p. 75.

beginning of the decade.²⁷³ Such a remarkable surge in plastics production and export was thanks to Italy's petrochemicals industry—a complex collaboration between state-run ENI and private corporations like Pirelli and Montecatini—which processed so much oil during the Marshall Plan years that it earned Italy the nickname “Europe's refinery.”²⁷⁴

Novel synthetics were available in Milan thanks to this booming industry, and indeed both Montecatini and Pirelli frequently collaborated with Milanese chemists and designers alike. Pirelli's 1948 collaboration with Marco Zanuso spawned a new design company called Arflex, specializing in foam-rubber furniture.²⁷⁵ In the same year, Montecatini mounted an exhibition at the Fiera di Milano to showcase developments in plastics technology.²⁷⁶

The most famous and prolific name for plastics in design is of course Kartell, founded in 1949 by the Italian chemist Giulio Castelli and headquartered in Milan. With few exceptions, virtually all of Kartell's consumer products throughout its sixty-five year history have been made of one kind of plastic or another. Kartell's first product was a ski rack Castelli conceived in 1949 from the new elastics in use at the Pirelli tire plant.

²⁷³ Ginzborg, *History of Contemporary Italy*, p. 215.

²⁷⁴ Elisabetta Bini, “Fueling the Cold War: Oil, Economic Development, and Mass Consumption in Postwar Italy and the Mediterranean,” New York University doctoral dissertation, 2011, p. 25.

²⁷⁵ Sparke, *Italian Design*, p. 98. In the late forties, Pirelli developed a type of foam rubber and commissioned Zanuso to design furniture for the new material. He designs the “Lady” armchair in 1951, whose name was inspired by its gently curvaceous form and lightweight feel, both benefits of its foam-rubber construction. This direct application of Pirelli's automotive technology, which included both foam rubber and a material called ‘nastricord’, won Zanuso the a gold medal at the Triennale of 1951. “La Lady della sperimentazione,” *la Repubblica.it*, “oggetti,” Apr 3, 2008, <http://design.repubblica.it/timeline/la-lady-della-sperimentazione/>, accessed Nov 12, 2013.

²⁷⁶ Sparke, *Italian Design*, p. 82.

Under technical director and chief designer Gino Colombini, Kartell opened divisions for household items in 1951, laboratory equipment in 1958, lighting in 1959, and other furniture in 1963. The company's stable of designers included such central figures as Marco Zanuso, Joe Colombo, and the Castiglioni brothers Achille and Pier Giacomo. Plastic Kartell products won Italy's highest design honor, the Compasso d'Oro, four times between 1954 and 1960, and would go on to win about 20 in all.²⁷⁷

In the 1950's Columbini designed a host of small domestic items in vividly colored plastic for Kartell: a lemon-squeezer, a dustpan, a thermos, a bucket. Penny Sparke describes the appeal of Columbini's products: "all of them in bright colors which contrasted dramatically with the hitherto ubiquitous 'peasant' brown of so many traditional household goods, showed that art could elevate the most menial tasks, such as cleaning, to a 'lifestyle' status."²⁷⁸ Roland Barthes may have disliked the "aggressive" "chemical-looking" colors of the new plastics, but in the homes of postwar Italy, it was precisely the artifice of their hue that constituted their appeal.

Later on in the sixties, Kartell's experimentation in new techniques for a range of plastics (polyethylene, polystyrene, polypropylene) would enable new possibilities for all-plastic furniture, and it was Italian designers who first made these possibilities a reality. Marco Zanuso's K 1340 polyethylene stacking chair of 1961, a collaboration with Richard Sapper, has been called "the first commercially-successful all-plastic

²⁷⁷ Silvia Annicchiarico, "The Culture of Plastics," in Elisa Storice and Hans Werner Holzwarth, eds., *Kartell: The Culture of Plastics* (Cologne: Taschen, 2012), pp. 19-20.

²⁷⁸ Sparke, *Italian Design*, p. 101.

chair.”²⁷⁹ Joe Colombo, who had been working in plastics since the late 50’s, designed the “Universale” for Kartell, which in 1967 became the first chair made entirely of the plastic compound known as ABS.

It is not by accident that Kartell was founded by a chemical engineer, since Milan’s Politecnico where Castelli trained was not only the incubator of top Italian designers like Gio Ponti, Zanuso, and Castiglioni, but also major hub of technical innovation in the field of plastics, particularly in partnership with the surging industry in and around Milan of the postwar period.

Castelli had studied with Giulio Natta, the chemist who won the Nobel Prize in 1963 for his work in plastics research and an indispensable figure in the history of Italian plastics. By the time of the economic miracle, Natta had already been a leader in the field of synthetic materials for decades. He determined the lattice constants of polystyrene and polypropylene, made strides in the production of synthetic rubber, and in 1954, in collaboration with Montecatini—Italy’s leading petrochemical company—he became the first to polymerize polypropylene, to this day the most common form of plastic, which went into mass production a few years later in Italy under the name Moplen.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Storice and Holzwarth, *Kartell: The Culture of Plastics*, p. 93. To be precise, Zanuso vies with Verner Panton as to when and by whom the first all-plastic chair was created. The Museum of Modern Art dates the Dane’s sinuous flowing red Panton chair to 1959-60, but the chair did not go into mass production until 1968. Zanuso and Sapper’s design dates to 1960, hitting the market in 1964 (p. 93). It mostly eschews organic form, but it did bring unreinforced plastic into Italian furniture design of the sixties in the guise of both domestic pragmatism and nostalgic regression: the chair is for a child.

²⁸⁰ Natta assumed control of Industrial Chemistry at the Politecnico in 1938 when the fascists forced out his Jewish predecessor. Natta was a world-renowned expert in the field of synthetic polymers, that is to say plastics. See his Nobel Lecture “From the Stereospecific Polymerization to the Asymmetric Autocatalytic Synthesis of Macromolecules,” later edited for *Nobel Lectures, Chemistry 1963-1970*, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1972.

Curiously enough, even on the level of form, plastic design embraced morphologies reminiscent of biological organisms. In international design culture of the decade preceding Manzoni's work, synthetic materials, even at the moment of their historical emergence, frequently assumed organic forms, particularly in the works of George Nelson, Harry Bertoia, Eero Saarinen, and the team of Charles and Ray Eames.²⁸¹ It was the synthesis of polymers, particularly glass-reinforced polyester (commonly known as fiberglass) that enabled the flowing organic morphologies of their modernist design objects in the first place.²⁸² Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen had famously failed to mass-produce their Organic Chair in molded plywood, which nonetheless won the Organic Design competition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941, albeit jury-rigged in glue and upholstery.²⁸³ A new material in itself, plywood was difficult to mold and prone to cracking, and it would be years before the mechanical possibility for compound curves in plywood would be developed. The fluidity of plastic submits much more easily to curvaceous flow, and both designers eventually turned to fiberglass in order to achieve the ergonomic biomorphism they desired. Although the distinctive plywood Eames chairs began to be produced in 1946, as early as 1948 Charles and Ray Eames were using

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/chemistry/laureates/1963/natta-bio.html, accessed 15 Oct 2013. Cf. Bosoni, "The Italian Way to Plastics," p. 76-81, and also Susan Mossman, *Fantastic Plastic: Product Design and Consumer Culture* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2008), p. 140.

²⁸¹ Although plastic design would take on a distinctly Italian identity, much of the technological knowhow, aesthetic form, and patterns of consumption that defined design in the immediate postwar period had initially been derived from American sources.

²⁸² Mossman, *Fantastic Plastic*, p. 22. A similar falling-back to biomorphic design would be repeated under the auspices of another epochal and technical leap decades later: the digital revolution and the new morphologies it offered, as in Frank Gehry's architecture for example. See Hal Foster, *Design as Crime (And Other Diatribes)* (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 24.

²⁸³ Eliot F. Noyes, ed., *Organic Design in Home Furnishings* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1941), p. 12.

glass-wool reinforced polyester for chairs like the DAX and LAR model armchairs. The Eames' "La Chaise" of 1948, the most overtly biomorphic and deliriously surrealist of all their furniture, also relied on a plastic shell for its curves.²⁸⁴ Fiberglass Eames chairs are constructed of gently sloping polymer shells supported from beneath by structures of metal, a composite composition they share in common with Saarinen's signature Tulip Chair of 1955-56.

In this, the first wave of postwar design, organic form and synthetic materials initiate an instrumental set of contradictions. These synthetic design objects promise a return to nature that is at the same time the mark of technological progress, a zone of Edenic comforts that only the most sophisticated scientific techniques could have provided. Morphologically indebted to Kiesler's work for Peggy Guggenheim, which in turn traced its roots through Surrealism to Miro and Arp, plastic design items like Saarinen's Tulip Chair blossomed into mass production as the sign of a postwar progressivism that could simultaneously disavow a break with nature. These objects not only take corporeal form as their referent, they also aspire to ensconce the body within enclosures of womblike comfort, a promise of happiness predicated on envelopment. "Indeed," wrote Adorno in 1945, "happiness is nothing other than being encompassed, an after-image of the original shelter within the mother."²⁸⁵

Consider, for example, the womb-spaces in modern design that were composed of materials new to science and industry. After winning the Organic Design competition with Eames, Saarinen went on to produce the *Womb Chair* (1948) of molded fiberglass

²⁸⁴ Paola Antonelli, Matilda McQuaid, and Terence Riley, eds., *Objects of Design from the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003), p. 134.

²⁸⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 112.

and resin.²⁸⁶ A decade later Arne Jacobsen used state-of-the-art fiberglass technology in the famous *Egg Chair* for the SAS Royal Hotel in Copenhagen, which, even more effectively than its uterine predecessor, promised its sitter a private space of comfort and repose, a moment of womb-return within the bustle of corporate space. In this way and in these materials, personal pods of the oceanic feeling (forever withheld) came to affirm the conditions of industrial capitalism. Industrial design could now redeem the loss that art had always mourned: the longed-for shelter of the maternal womb could now be churned out at the end of an assembly line.

In Europe it was Scandinavian countries, particularly Denmark, where design followed the sinuous paths of “organic functionalism.” Designers in the north continued to produce consumer goods in the aesthetic of Saarinen and Jacobsen, but more often in wood than in plastic. With attention to craft and natural materials, Scandinavian design placed heavy emphasis on artisanal naturalism, even if certain designers, like Jacobsen and Verner Panton, continued to favor synthetic resins.

In Italy too, design objects found themselves taking on fluid and sinuous curves in the first years after the war. Penny Sparke describes the orientation toward organic forms, particularly those inspired by biomorphic sculpture, that characterized Italy’s nascent industrial design culture of the immediate postwar years. Milan’s leading design periodical *Domus* printed images of organic designs by Eames, Saarinen, George Nelson and Harry Bertoia right alongside sculpture by Jean Arp and Henry Moore. Melded to a simplified streamlining, also inherited from an American (Raymond Loewy), organic

²⁸⁶ Jerryll Habegger and Joseph H. Osman, *Sourcebook for Modern Furniture* Third Edition (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), p. 13.

form became a central organizing principle in Italian design of the late forties and early fifties.

Although biomorphism would give way to stylistic diversity in the fifties, new materials like plastic remained a constant in Italian design culture during these years. It is enough to remember that even Gio Ponti's wooden Superleggera (1951), the most aggressively retrograde, craft-oriented design object of Italian midcentury design, was originally produced with a plastic seat.²⁸⁷ Italian designers of all stripes enthusiastically embraced new materials, none of which was newer or more modern than plastic.

Even within its stylistic variety, however, Italian design never completely deserted organic form. For example, Achille Castiglioni designed his Brera lamp in 1962, a dangling light fixture in the shape of an egg. The name and the shape both pay homage to the most famous egg in all of art history, the one dangling above the Madonna's head in Piero della Francesca's *Sacred Conversation* (1472), a painting which hangs at the Brera Academy in Milan. Other Castiglioni lights would use synthetic materials to achieve an innovative resolution of biomorphic and mechanomorphic form. In a series of lights like the Teraxacum of 1960 (Fig. 53), the designer sprayed what he called a "cocoon" of synthetic fibers over a delicate metal substructure, a technique pioneered by George Nelson. The result is a taught, curving skin in radial symmetry, recalling at once both a batwing and a flying saucer.²⁸⁸ The lamp does indeed resemble some alien chrysalis, and were it not for its radial regularity, the object would approach the suspended fleshlike surfaces of Eva Hesse's work later in the sixties.

²⁸⁷ Celant, *The Italian Metamorphosis*, p. 626.

²⁸⁸ Emilio Ambasz, ed., *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972), p. 66.

In the decade following Manzoni's death, plastic design in Italy would continue to explore organic form with renewed vigor. In the post-miracolo years, plastic materials in organic form became a hallmark of designers who spoke of themselves as an "avant-garde." In 1966 the Italian collective Archizoom created the wave-form sofa Superonda in expanded resin and plastic fabric covering, clearly indebted to Kiesler's Multi-Use Chair of 1942, in oak and linoleum (recognizable from Peggy Guggenheim's 57th Street Gallery).²⁸⁹ The first inflatable armchair, a buoyant bubble of PVC entitled "Blow," was designed by a team of three Italians a year later,²⁹⁰ and polyurethane modules make up the Serpentone ("Jumbo Snake"), a sofa of infinite length by Cini Boeri (1970-71).²⁹¹ The chair that most often serves as the emblem of Italian design in the sixties, however, is the Sacco beanbag chair of 1969, which owes its cushy comfort to the polystyrene pellets inside its textile cover, available in both leather and plastic.²⁹²

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 108; Celant, *The Italian Metamorphosis*, p. 647.

²⁹⁰ Their names are Paolo Lomazzi, Donato D'Urbino and Jonathan De Pas. See Giuseppe Furlanis, "Furniture Design and Its Philosophies," in *Italian Style: Forms of Creativity*, ed. Omar Calabrese (Milano: Skira, 1998), p. 37.

²⁹¹ Ambasz, *The New Domestic Landscape*, p. 121.

²⁹² Designed by Paolo Gatti, Cesare Paolini, and Franco Teodoro. Celant, *The Italian Metamorphosis*, p. 644.



Figure 53. Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni. Teraxacum S2 cocoon suspension lamp. 1960

Polemical Excursus: Polymorphism and Class in Italian Postwar Design

Penny Sparke's excellent history of postwar Italian design stresses the organicism of the immediate postwar years, which gave way to a greater formal diversity in the fifties. Although she provides all the clues to account for this shift and its significance for Italian design writ large, her book balks at assembling them into what might read as a polemic. This section puts those pieces together.

Sparke is right to emphasize the organicism in the immediate postwar period, but by the mid-50's Italian design had become polymorphous—fitful and complex in its aesthetic commitments. Some objects flirt with biomorphism without fully embracing it—geometric elements may find themselves melded to a Saarinen swoop—while many others reject organic form entirely to assume the angularity of their Rationalist forebears. The production of Gio Ponti, the titan at the helm of *Domus*, is exemplary. His design aesthetic is especially erratic, ranging from international style architecture to neo-

Baroque trompe-l'oeil furniture. Cutlery for the 1951 Milan Triennale employs a playful organicism, while the Distex armchair (1953) features a boldly trapezoidal, rounded-corner geometry. Ponti is best-known for his little wooden Superleggera chair, which restored traditional craft techniques to 50's design in a pert simplicity that appealed to modern tastes.²⁹³

Although there is no reason to suppose that design should necessarily organize itself around a national 'school' defined by continuity of aesthetic form, stylistic variety as a hallmark of Italian design came as a necessary consequence of a design culture oriented toward a particular class identity. If in Scandinavia and America modern design could at least pretend to address the needs of the collective, Italian design defined itself as the sphere of a sophisticated elite, and therefore a wide range of aesthetic stylings was required to provide the illusion of individual distinction among the population of its consumers. As Sparke writes, "By the mid-1950s Italian furniture had become one of the major, international symbols of an affluent, cosmopolitan lifestyle. It had even begun to challenge the dominance of Scandinavian furniture, with its ideology of democracy, tradition, and craftsmanship."²⁹⁴ This brand of design culture was ideally situated to participate in Italy's postwar economic development, which was oriented increasingly toward the export of consumer goods, especially those of a luxury variety.²⁹⁵ High-end luxury and refinement became Italy's niche in the international markets that catapulted it into the boom years, so it is no wonder that design and designers stood at the forefront of the new Italian national identity.

²⁹³ See Sparke, *Italian Design*, pp. 96-97.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

²⁹⁵ Ginzborg, *History of Contemporary Italy*, p. 216.

Italian industrial design appealed to class sensibilities through both structural and cultural means. Although they applied the most advanced technologies and materials, Italian design manufacturers remained relatively small in size, frequently retaining skilled artisans (a holdover of Italy's pre-industrial past) to promote a sense of quality and justify high prices. Often family firms, these companies catered to wealthy international clients rather than to working-class masses. Keeping close company with artist and critics like Gillo Dorfles and Bruno Munari, Italian designers downplayed commercial concerns, emphasizing instead the artistic and "theoretical" pretensions of their work. Italy was on the front lines of the international strategy in industrial design—ubiquitous nowadays—to leverage fine arts associations for capital gain and the definition of class as "lifestyle." Gio Ponti described his design philosophy this way: "Our ideal of the 'good life' and the level of taste and thought expressed by our homes and manner of living are all part of the same thing."²⁹⁶ The utopian notion of total design, which in the prewar years had aspired to liberatory social concerns, is here retooled as a sign of taste and sophistication, the sort of domestic refinement that befits haute-bourgeois individualism (this, even as all possibility of the "bourgeois individual" was systematically dismantled specifically at the hands of mass culture and its designs).

Designing Synthetic Bodies

If Scandinavian design is virtually synonymous with organicism, and if Milanese designers put heavy emphasis on plastics, it should come as no surprise that it was a Milanese artist working in both Italy and Denmark who was best able to confront the implications of these design tendencies for the neo-avantgarde. It is no coincidence, for

²⁹⁶ quoted in Sparke, *Italian Design*, p. 81.

example, that these materials find themselves in achromatic works of art. Compared to the kaleidoscopic array of colorful plastic design objects, Manzoni's synthetic Achromes appear all the more insistent in their whiteness, especially since their nylon, acrylic, and polystyrene could have come from the very same factories that supplied the design industry.

The Bodies of Air make the connection with consumer objects most explicit. Like consumer goods, Manzoni's white plastic Corpi d'aria come in do-it-yourself kits with simple instructions printed on their mechanically-produced labels. Seen within the context of circa '60 commodity culture, the modish interior that serves as the set for the Corpi d'aria newsreel all of a sudden takes on an improbable appurtenance. Arranged just so in front of a black-and-white textile of circular patterns in positive-negative alteration, each synthetic Corpi could be just another design object, as at home in the stylish modern apartment as both the credenza and the model. The Corpi's black wire tripod echoes the spindly black verticality of the lighting fixture behind it, just as the deflated Corpi on the coffee table echo the elongated white ovals of the credenza behind them. In addition, the tripod's three-legged form recalls Castiglioni's Luminator lamp of 1954, and the entire structure resembles nothing so much as Noguchi's white biomorphic table lamps of the same period.

The Placentarium takes up the womb and egg topoi ubiquitous in design objects of the era. Not only Castiglioni's luminous Brera, but also Saarinen's plastic womb and Jacobsen's plastic egg could all be said to converge here in this light-up plastic ovum. As a work of pneumatic architecture, the piece is also part of a wave of pneumatic structures that would break across the entire decade of the sixties, especially in Italy. Many of these

blow-up environments of the late 60's, like countercultural turns on the plastic wombspaces that preceded them, also promised a return to nature.²⁹⁷

Among such peers, Manzoni's work is all the more emphatic in its insistence on the impossibility of return, implicating plastics, art, and design in a transformation of life beyond the horizon of syntheticity. In the giant plastic balloon of Manzoni's *Placentarium*, for example, the mammalian placenta merges with both its evolutionary ancestor, the egg, and its futuristic heir, the apparatus of artificial life. The viewer enters the womb only to find the cellular structure of a panoptic prison, an aesthetic envelopment which induces a violent regression. Such aesthetic violence will open onto the behaviorist manipulation manifest in the *Labyrinth* project (see Chapter 1), but it also entails the production of an artificially-engineered human being, the denaturalization of a body gestated in a plastic placenta.

In fact, Manzoni's oeuvre is populated by a menagerie of synthetic bodies. The cyborg science-fiction side of Manzoni does not appear much in the literature on this artist, but his interest in this sort of synthetic organism spans most of his career. He was an avid reader of the science-fiction periodical *Urania*, which regularly featured cybernetic life-forms of all kinds, as well as sections on "Scientific Curiosities" like "mutation in the atomic age," "batteries and living cells," and "our bodies at the limits of death."²⁹⁸ From his earliest works to his last published text, the artist continually imagined creatures both biological and artificial.

²⁹⁷ These environments were heavily featured in the 1972 MoMA exhibition "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape," and explored at length in the catalogue. Cf. Ambasz, *The New Domestic Landscape*.

²⁹⁸ Tentler, "Without Expensive Transport," pp. 69-72. *Urania* was a weekly periodical of science-fiction novels, published beginning in 1952. Featuring stories written mostly by

Already in the early paintings of his Nuclear period, Manzoni embraces these themes. While the so-called “prefigurative” bodies of other Nuclearists like Enrico Baj returned painting to the well-worn territory of childhood primitivism (see *Little Child with His Games* of 1952 for example), Manzoni’s figures in 1956 and ‘57 suggest both biomorphic and robotic entities. Floating humanoid silhouettes with TV antennae on either side of their heads populate dozens of the early paintings. As in *Paradoxus Smith* (1957), they are frequently gendered female or male: the females give birth to smaller beings, while the males feature a dangling genital appendage (sometimes in a thatch of hair) between their parentheses-shaped legs. The little black humanoids often emit bursts of energy in the form of brisk colored brushstrokes, and far beneath them, at the bottom of the canvas, little geometric appendages reach upward like the arms of an unseen crowd. Each little appendage (or are they plants?) terminates in a c-shaped hand or geometric blossom (Fig. 54).

Anglophone authors in Italian translation, *Urania* introduced Italian readers to such luminaries of the genre as Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, L. Ron Hubbard, Ron Herbert, and J.G. Ballard. Each edition of the magazine also included a section on “Scientific Curiosities.”



Figure 54. Piero Manzoni. *Paradoxus Smith*. 1957

At the other end of his career, Manzoni explicitly expressed his desire to make an artificial animal. He imagined a mechanical creature that would move independently, nourish itself from the sun, and lie in repose at night. During the day it would move around, he wrote, “emit sounds, energy beams, antennae to seek out sustenance and avoid obstacles: it would also have the ability to reproduce.”²⁹⁹ Needless to say, Manzoni’s project for a cybernetic organism was never executed, but the automaton he imagined does share many aspects in common with the little humanoid figures of the Nuclear canvases. Both interact with their environment, emit energy rays, feel their way with antennae, and give birth to smaller versions of themselves.

There is also a curious collection of undated drawings that might depict something like these automatons. Several pages of these drawings exist, most of them in ink and crayon, jaggedly applied, and at least one in ink and watercolor. The images are frequently numbered, one with arrows pointing from the numbers to various parts in a

²⁹⁹ Germano Celant, *Piero Manzoni: catalogo generale* (Milano: Prearo Editore, 1975), p. 79.

diagram, a technique Manzoni also used for the *Placentarium* schematics. The formal logic of these drawings calls to mind a variety of associations; although imposing an order of mimetic resemblance might do violence to these images—they all verge on abstraction—taken together and in light of Manzoni’s other work, their forms are highly evocative of a range of entities, from robots and plants to spaceships and animals.



Figure 55. Piero Manzoni. undated drawing.

For example, one page (Fig. 55) has six numbered images: the first resembles a winged insect in flight. The next depicts an angular four-limbed body that appears to be

shooting out blue force-lines from the center of its yellow appendages, like a robot mid-explosion. In the third, a fish or bird-like creature falls from the sky, its scissor-like mouth open and breathing fire, while more flames (or are they feathers?) trail dramatically behind. The morphology of its body calls to mind the creature in Manzoni's early *Le cose* of 1957, in which the imprints of machine-parts and shears suggest drifting, open-mouthed marine animals. The fourth image depicts vertical stalks that branch and terminate in tan and orange extrusions like crystalline flowers. In the fifth, a greenish tadpole-like creature clings to a straight blue stem. From its head protrude more purple force-lines which could be either the feathery gills of a newt or the death-ray of an alien. This greenish creature, it should be noted, conforms very closely to the morphology of the floating black hominids in the Nuclear canvases, as if one of them were drawn here in profile, wrapped around a pole. Not only does it share the arrangement of limbs and force-lines, it even has a little phallic appendage smushed against the vertical blue stem that it clutches. The sixth image at the bottom of the page is the largest. Brown strokes of crayon stake out a groundline, from which emerge two angular yellow constructions. The one on the left is either a robot submerged head-first in the ground, or a giant mechanical clamp reaching skyward. The one on the right echoes an arrangement repeated in many of the other drawings in this folio: a set of parentheses-shapes with colored tips, between which glows a scribbled orb with energy shooting out of either side. In other sketches, similar shapes look like spaceships rocketing through the void, but this one, anchored by a brown pole to the groundline, appears to be docked.

What is yet more revealing about this strange set of sketches is that among their vibrantly mechanistic number there is one that is distinctly different. In ink with no

color, this odd-man-out is nothing other than an anatomical drawing of a dissected body (Fig. 56). At the center is an organ closely resembling a human heart, and down below (or above?) are smaller, twinned organs, perhaps kidneys. Branching off from the heart, a series of tubes cluster around the center, terminating prematurely like open veins. One great strip of swiftly-executed lines clear a path down the center of the page in a central passage not unlike a trachea, esophagus, or spinal cord. The organs and their connecting elements are arranged more or less symmetrically across this middle stripe, and therefore the entire composition invokes bilateral symmetry, but with the subtle yet significant differences between left-half and right-half that characterize the interior organs of the human body.

But this anatomical sketch is drab and badly-drawn, especially when compared with the liveliness of its mechanico-zoomorphic neighbors. While forms evocative of robots and spaceships zoom and shatter in slashes of vivid color, this body is drained of chroma. At its center lies a blanched and unbeating heart, exsanguinated. This body is lifeless, less a dissection than an autopsy. Considering that all the arteries have been severed, perhaps the patient died for lack of that plastic aorta Barthes wrote about.

The body remains absolutely central to Manzoni's practice, and yet this bloodless sketch is the only iconic image of a body Manzoni ever produced. In so many of this artist's works, the human body is invoked, interpellated, instrumentalized, suggested *in absentia*, but its image as mimetic representation is absolutely forbidden. It is permitted only once, only here, as the severed remnants from an operating table among a menagerie of zoomorphic robots, the last vestige of the natural body in the strange new wilderness of synthetic ones.

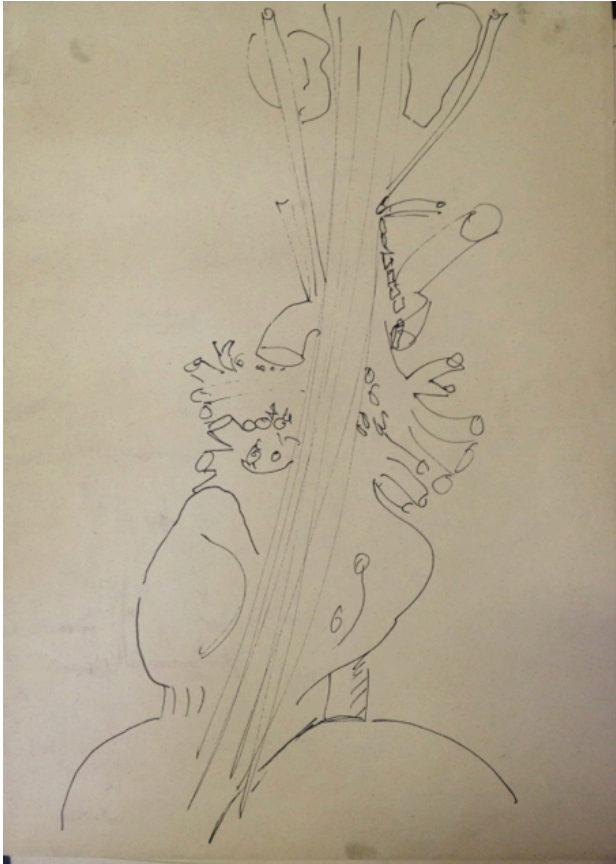


Figure 56. Piero Manzoni. undated drawing.

After Nature: No Returns Allowed

In Italy as elsewhere in the West, the new consumer commodity culture had completely transformed the domestic landscape, and with it the dynamics of object relations. Among the proliferation of colorful plastic design objects, the ability of artworks to exempt themselves from the vicissitudes of commodity culture became less and less credible. If already in Seurat's *Les Poseuses* (1888) and Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergere* (1882) mass-produced commodities take on the very liveliness that is conspicuously missing from their human (and not coincidentally female) counterparts, by 1960 commodities had become all the more subjectivized, intruding ever more insistently on the allegedly autonomous self-determination of both subjects and *objets d'art* alike.

The situation for the neo-avantgarde in Milan was especially urgent, since leading artistic practitioners from Fontana to Dorfles to Munari became collaborators and even pioneers in the flourishing new culture of increasingly totalized design.

If the subjectivization of objects and the objectification of subjects was a dialectic already plain by the late 19th century, the postwar explosion of objects exceeded the condition of quantitative increase to achieve a shift of a more fundamentally qualitative character. A central aspect of this shift was the advent of materials wholly new to planet earth, manmade materials that would obey humankind's every command, transforming themselves into whatever shape or color that desire might require. For Barthes, plastic disclosed its artifice all too quickly, revealing its synthetic origin in the hollowness of its sound, the chemical glare of its colors, and its inability "to achieve the triumphant smoothness of Nature."³⁰⁰ But he also perceived that plastics threatened to transform Nature itself, or even replace it entirely. "The age-old function of nature is modified," he writes, "it is no longer the Idea, the pure Substance to be regained or imitated: an artificial Matter, more bountiful than all the natural deposits, *is about to replace her*, and to determine the very invention of forms."³⁰¹ How true that statement was, Barthes cannot have known, given the global environmental impact and ecological devastation from plastics and other synthetics in the decades since he wrote those lines. But what Barthes points to are the philosophical consequences of these new materials, that is, the historicity of matter itself and the possibility that the very notion of Nature—of forms of life "outside" human activity—may have reached the moment of its historical closure.

³⁰⁰ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 98.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98 (italics mine).

Standing at the threshold of nature and culture, neither artworks nor bodies are exempt from these changes. It is not for nothing that so many of Manzoni's works are called "bodies," that their plastic material invokes biotic life even as it flouts naturalism. For Manzoni as for Barthes, organic life—in a double sense responsible for the existence of plastics in the first place—has been fundamentally altered by historical conditions under advanced capitalism. The collision of the organic and the synthetic in Manzoni's work (on the level of material, form, or whatever) entails the vivification of synthetic objects, an uncanny liveliness of artificial things that defined the developments in object relations in the new totality of consumer design. In mounting faux fur swatches or causing polystyrene to swarm, Manzoni subjectivizes the artwork even as he desubjectivizes the artist. It is not for nothing that the only image of a "natural" body Manzoni ever produced was a cadaverous sketch of dissected organs, while all other bodies parading through his work are so ostentatiously the products of design.

In this battle of organic and synthetic, death comes to the natural body and to natural life, and certainly to all previously-sustainable notions of "the natural." Inimical to life and built of its ancient remains, synthetic materials play a double game with nature and death. Plastics denaturalize a human body even in the very act of keeping it alive, as in Barthes' plastic artery or the medical apparatus that sustains organisms lucky enough to have access to it. But they also threaten life in a thousand ways: by destroying the environment, polluting the seas, causing diseases like cancer, and even mutating gene sequences. In either sense, life on earth has been irremediably altered by synthetic materials, such that no-body can any longer be said to exist wholly apart from them. The order of the synthetic has come to bear on all earthly life-processes, to the degree that

terms like “organic” or “natural” have lost their historical claim to autonomy. Recall that plastics are petrochemicals, born of the fossil fuels that have remade the face of the globe, the entire climate of the earth, and the lifeforms that improbably persist there. Plastics are the emblem of human artifice not only because they do not exist “in nature,” but because they are made from the material foundations of this economic and historical epoch, the geologic age of anthropogenic change that we now call the Anthropocene—natural history become a synthetic product.³⁰²

This chapter began with Manzoni’s break from the Nuclear Group, an artistic movement that declared a return to nature, a redemption of the organic body for art. In an age when both monochromy and modern design still promised the oceanic plenitude the womb, Manzoni forecloses all naturalist returns. What Manzoni came to realize, and what his works make clear, is that there may not be any such thing as “nature” left to return to.

Two Last Things: The Life and Death of Achromes

This chapter has examined the dialectic of organic and synthetic in Manzoni’s works through a close reading of his materials. But if we can generally say that organic materials took on a cold geometric denaturalization, and synthetic materials an energetic vivacity, the confrontation of these two orders was never so clear as in the two Achromes with which I will conclude the chapter. These two works are very different, both from one another and from other works in the Achrome series, and they have seldom warranted a mention in the Manzoni literature. The first is made of eggs suspended in

³⁰² For the origin of the term Anthropocene and its epistemic rearrangement of humanity’s role in geologic time, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter, 2009), pp. 197-222.

acrylic, and the second is made of polystyrene balls in a kaolin-encrusted cellophane bag. Taken together, these works confront the entwinement of organic and synthetic life in unique ways, ironically enough in their invocation of death. Perhaps it is only logical that Manzoni's dialectic must culminate here, in a revision of mortality, the one condition common to all lifeforms.



Figure 57. Piero Manzoni. Achrome. 1960

What Eva Sorensen remembers most about her first meeting with Piero Manzoni was the stench. In 1960, in a prefabricated metal studio outside the Black Factory in Herning, she found a “strange little man from Italy” submerging eggs in hot liquid acrylic. Although eggs may be famous for their sulfurous odor, it was in fact the smell of plastic that Sorensen recalls. The acrylic was set to cool in large metal trays specially constructed by the factory machinists, but the fumes from the molten plastic were so intense that the factory owner and Manzoni's patron Aage Damgaard had been forced to

build a small outdoor shed to house the project.³⁰³ The result of all this factory labor, when the fumes had cleared, was a transparent parallelepiped with eggs fixed inside like fruits in a Jell-O mold (Fig. 57).

In this work, the orders of the organic and the synthetic appear almost programmatically opposed: organic eggs vs. synthetic acrylic. The geometric parallelepiped of plastic engulfs the by-now-familiar biomorphism of the egg. The alimentary nutrition of eggs confronts the maleficent artifice of acrylic, whose chemistry is so insalubrious that it had to be moved outside to save the laborers from its noxious effluvia. But even as it threatens life, the plastics also promise to extend it: the fragile mortality of the eggs is suspended in the preservative vacuum of plastic, thus arresting its inevitable decay, like leftovers in a Tupperware tub. In this Achrome as in the middle-class kitchen, synthetic polymers promise to preserve perishable substances, postponing their deterioration and prolonging their usefulness, since everything from blood to milk to yesterday's breakfast can be kept fresh within the hermetic seal of plastic containers. This aspect of the organic-synthetic convergence was not lost on Manzoni, and preservation emerges as a major trope throughout his oeuvre: shit preserved in cans, for example, or breath preserved in balloons. He also expressed his desire to preserve his own blood, although the project was never realized.

Plastics' promise of immortality is a double-failure, however. First, it fails in that its preservative effects are only temporary. Even in Tupperware, old food will eventually go bad. Plastics preserve life by sealing off one form of organism from another, in optimal cases protecting their contents from the molds and bacteria that would sustain

³⁰³ Author's interview with Eva Sorensen, March 2013. In a letter to Marco Santini from this period, Manzoni writes, "Here in Herning I have assistants and workers or technicians at my disposal...I'm working on a few plastic boxes full of eggs." Celant 2004, p. 234.

their own lives by feeding on the body within. They operate, therefore, not by promoting life but by managing it, separating one organism from another in an organized disruption of natural processes. To this end the results of Manzoni's Herning experiments were predictably unstable, and workers at the factory would soon experience a different stench, namely the smell of rotting eggs.

Although he made many works of eggs suspended in acrylic, some reported to include as many as 120 eggs, only one survives. It was likely once as limpid as water, but its acrylic has yellowed over the years, as though this synthetic resin were reverting to amber, its natural prototype famous for preserving even prehistoric lifeforms. But even this piece has failed to parse life conclusively and successfully. Inside the bio-synthetic hybrid of this piece, several species of fungi have taken up residence, creating a florid mini-ecosystem of brown and yellow growths. The slowly-decaying eggs themselves have taken revenge upon their captor, releasing acidic gases into the plastic that have already caused it serious degradation. The acrylic Manzoni used had only recently been developed, before science had synthesized today's more stable form, and it has begun to break down like Naum Gabo's doomed plastic sculptures of the prewar era. At this point, ironically, it seems likely that the plastic will rot before the eggs inside do.³⁰⁴

Second, plastics' promise of immortality is also a failure in that the very preservation of the body is itself an invocation of death. What else are these suspended eggs but an operation of embalming? Since nothing can survive within an airtight container, this transparent prism becomes a sort of synthetic sarcophagus. Like Snow White in her glass coffin, the eggs only survive as dead things, and it comes as no

³⁰⁴ For this entire paragraph, I am indebted to Filiz Kuvvetli and the staff of the conservation lab at the ARoS art museum in Aarhus, Denmark, where the piece underwent restoration in 2013. Interview with Filiz Kuvvetli, March 2013.

surprise that the other objects Manzoni proposed to enclose in plastic parallelepipeds were human corpses, including perhaps his own one.³⁰⁵

The promise of synthetic materials is that they will preserve organic existence, stave off decay, and ultimately take us to a place beyond death. But the disavowal of death inevitably becomes the very thing that brings it about. The dialectic is nowhere more evident than in those forms of plastic that refuse to decay, those that lock their hydrocarbon molecules into lattices so stable that Primo Levi (who also trained as a chemist at the Politecnico di Milano) sets them among the same interminable timespans as limestone and diamond in sequestering carbon atoms from the cycle of life.³⁰⁶ One need only think of polystyrene's infamous refusal to biodegrade, its accumulation in vast garbage-heaps throughout the globe. If Manzoni's plastics invoked both commodity culture and organic life, then it is only fitting that they should also invoke the afterlife of synthetic materials and its effects.

There is one such work in Manzoni's catalogue of synthetic bodies, a wraith of an achrome that is the most debased—and ignored—of all this artist's works (Fig. 58). Made of a plastic bag filled with polysterene balls and caked in clumps of kaolin, it condenses a host of his techniques and materials into a sad manifesto of decrepitude. It is with this work that I will close this chapter.

It looks like a piece of trash, like the discarded remnants of commodity packaging. Whatever treasure once lay inside has been plundered, and these old plastic skins, having served the stint of use-value for which they were designed, have achieved

³⁰⁵ Battino and Palazzoli, p. 161.

³⁰⁶ Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), p. 231.

their ultimate and everlasting purpose as garbage. A refusal turned to refuse, an Achrome was never so decrepit as this one. The crusts of kaolin cling pathetically to its plastic surface, crumbling off like the paint on an old wrapper, like the fading memory of a once-organic self. It is an Achrome, certainly, but also and equally a broken Corpo d'Aria. It is a collapsed lung, a worn-out womb in the shadow of the Placentarium, with its little polystyrene alveoli clustered helplessly as though after some pneumatic catastrophe. It is tied off at the top and bottom like a balloon, but as an old Fiato d'artista, it has long-since heaved its last breath. If this be another plastic body, in other words, then it is certainly a dead one. In dying, however, it is doomed to a long earthly purgatory, the zombie existence of a body that cannot ever truly die. This cadaver of air is therefore condemned to eternity as the deathless corpse of synthetic materials, whose half-lives are measured in millennia.



Figure 58. Piero Manzoni.
Achrome. c. 1961

Chapter Four. The Life and Works of Piero Manzoni

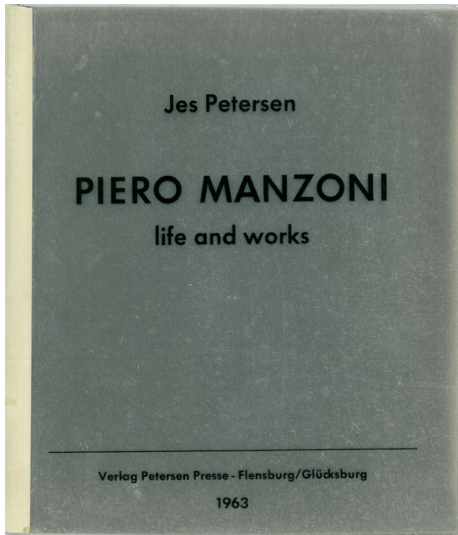


Figure 59. Piero Manzoni. *Piero Manzoni: Life and Works*. 1963

The first English-language monograph of Piero Manzoni was conceived during the artist's short lifetime, late in the year 1961. This fact may come as something of a surprise to those familiar with Manzoni literature, since it has become a fact universally acknowledged that Manzoni's reception in the Anglophone world has been belated at best.³⁰⁷ Sure enough, however, correspondence between Manzoni and one Jes Petersen, a German publisher and book dealer, attest to the development of a monographic volume entitled *Piero Manzoni: Life and Work* as early as December 1961. The book's cover names Petersen himself as the author of the text, and indeed this small-time polymath would go on to write several other books in his lifetime. As the subject of a monograph, Manzoni was enviably forthcoming. The artist not only consented to the book, he also took an active role in the project. His letters to Petersen reveal a zealous participant, a gregarious and enthusiastic partner in the development of the text.

³⁰⁷ Cf. Nancy Spector, "A Temporary Blindness: Piero Manzoni and America," in Celant 1991.

The first printing in 1963 was extremely small, but the book was re-issued in 1969 in an edition of 100 (Fig. 59, 60). Neither edition of the book circulated far, however, and most remain in the hands of private collectors. But even if the book had been published in larger numbers and enjoyed wider distribution, there is reason to believe that it still may have failed to transmit much information about Manzoni's life and work. Even if the monograph had achieved best-seller status, in fact, the art historical or biographical information disseminated by the book is likely to have remained rather severely limited. This is not because the subject withheld information (Manzoni proved a candid source) or because its author misconstrued the facts (Petersen was scrupulous). There were neither translation mishaps (despite the duo's language difficulties), nor any badly written passages (no, in fact, it is all quite clear).

The simple reason why the book says so little is precisely this: all its pages are blank.

The book looks mundane enough when lying on a tabletop, but if you were to grasp the book by its white metal spine and flip through its pages, the secret would reveal itself right away. It would reveal itself, that is, by revealing precisely nothing, the nothing that is printed all over its pages. The book would also reveal a second surprise, since these blank pages are composed not of paper, but of clear plastic material. They are perfectly transparent, like a stack of synthetic diaphanes. Light passes freely through each flexing plastic page unhindered by printed matter, its wordless pages gleaming in pristine plastic clarity.

Devoid of ink, all its pages are empty. All, that is, except one: the first one, the first page, that is, the cover, which is also made of clear plastic. It lists the name of the

author, Jes Petersen, followed by the title *PIERO MANZONI*, the subtitle *life and work*, and finally at the bottom of the page, the publication information: *VERLAG PETERSEN PRESSE – FLENSBURG-GLÜCKSBURG 1963*. These are the only words, the only letters, the only text, impressed upon the pages of the book.

Blank and transparent, the book plays games with legibility and clarity, but also with authorship, for although the cover bears the name Jes Petersen in the typographical top slot reserved for the name of the author, it is obvious from their correspondence (as indeed from the structure of the work itself) that this book was “written” by none other than Manzoni himself. Manzoni dictated the text for the cover and created the book’s design, even specifying its dimensions and materials in letters and diagrams that he sent to Petersen.³⁰⁸ This first Manzoni monograph, therefore, was in fact an autobiography.

The piece sets in motion a number of enigmatic operations: A work of art that is a book. A book that is blank inside. A book made of transparent plastic. An artist who makes his own monograph. A book that promises “life and work,” but provides only see-through surfaces. An artist taking on the role of author and critic, only to duck that role-reversal with the substitution of the publisher’s name. It is perhaps because of the complexities of these multiple and overlapping operations that the reception of the book has been somewhat troubled in a number of ways, many of which are anticipated already in the structure of the work, which denies legibility through the specificities of its absences and defies categorization by means of typographic misdirection. Setting *Life*

³⁰⁸ In one frequently reproduced letter from Manzoni to Petersen, possibly from January 1962, Manzoni outlines the specifications for the book; see Battino and Palazzoli, p. 146. On the diagram he draws, the subtitle is missing, but a later letter (probably written as a response to the typographical arrangements for the cover later in 1962), Manzoni is emphatic about the wording: “Achtung!” he writes, “the life and the works NO CORRECT! is life and is work correct! Thank you!” [sic]. Unpublished correspondence, Manzoni Archive, Milan.

and Work within a trajectory of thwarted books, this chapter will tackle each of these operations in an effort to amend the historical record and to provide, if such a thing is possible, a reading of the book.

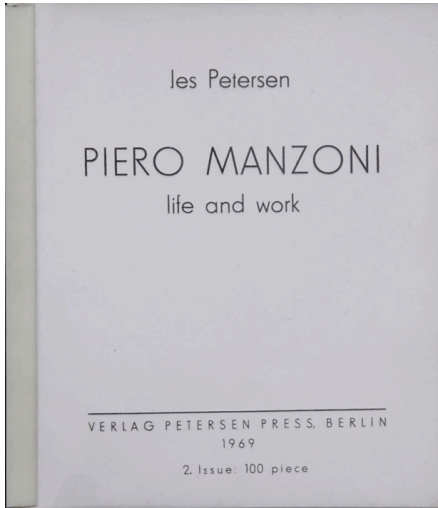


Figure 60. Piero Manzoni. Piero Manzoni: Life and Work (2nd ed.). 1969

The White Phantom and the Materiality of the Book

A book of transparencies was Manzoni's initial idea, but technical difficulties made its production impossible in 1962, the year of the first typographical compositions for the cover. Apparently, plastic pages were difficult to come by in those days, and the technical capability of printing on plastic more difficult still.³⁰⁹ What little text actually needed to be printed, namely the cover, was impossible to achieve with plastic pages. In 1962, it seems, Manzoni and Petersen simply lacked the technical ability to print on plastic.

³⁰⁹ Battino and Palazzoli, p. 146, based on an interview with Petersen in 1991. A letter dated December 6, 1961 testifies to the duo's technical and financial difficulties. Manzoni tells Petersen that he could find the transparent paper in Italy, and offers to send it to Petersen. Unpublished correspondence, Manzoni Archive, Milan.

There is hilarious irony in this difficulty: that a book of blank pages should be delayed because it could not be imprinted with text. These transparent pages *in their very materiality* refused to accept the printed word. Such technical difficulties highlight not only the importance of the cover and the discursive authority it bears, but also the technical contingency of the book-form in general. As the physical substrate of textual impression, books and all that they carry are immanent in the means of production; their existence and their capacity to signify are fully dependent upon the productive and distributive apparatus of a given historical moment. Without the development of certain productive technologies, Manzoni's wish for an invisible book faded into disappointment. The words unprinted on its surfaces temporize the technical feat to-be-completed, a sequence of absences in the future tense.

Germano Celant has speculated that, as a compromise, a single volume was published in 1962 on blank white paper pages instead of transparent plastic, but the existence of this white-paged phantom "lost original" has never been verified.³¹⁰ Although the story is told in numerous authoritative texts, there is no evidence to support the belief that the white paper book was ever produced.³¹¹ There was no white-paged phantom, and the first edition of *Life and Work*, printed indeed on plastic transparencies,

³¹⁰ Celant, *Book as Artwork 1960/1972*, 2nd Edition (Brooklyn: 6 Decades Books, 2010), pp. 22-23; the first edition of this book, from 1972, was issued by Nigel Greenwood, Inc. in London.

³¹¹ Celant has repeated this claim, with certain qualifications, as recently as 2004 in the biographical text of the Manzoni *Catalogo generale*; see Celant 2004, p. 622. In a letter dated August 8, 1962, Petersen calls the postcards a "makeshift arrangement" [*provisorium*]. It may be this paper postcard that Celant had mistaken for the "compromise" of a white paper book. The hypothesis of the paper book probably originated in a text "Made in Italy: Piero Manzoni (1933-1963)" written by Henk Peeters for the *Haagse Post*, Amsterdam, on the occasion of Manzoni's death. Peeters writes, "In '61 [sic] the publisher Jes Petersen (Flensburg, Germany) edited the book 'Life and works of Piero Manzoni' [sic], a tasteful collection of white paper." See Battino and Palazzoli, p. 161.

was published in 1963.³¹² It would be easy to dismiss Celant's theory as simple apocrypha, a groundless speculation that, through repetition in the critical literature, passes into the dubious realm of rumor. But to reject the white phantom as historical inaccuracy would seem also to belie the lessons of Manzoni's blank monograph, a work which anticipates, in its very structure, the gaps and lacunae and contingencies of artistic reception. As this artwork in the form of a monograph suggests, works of art are always-already implicated in the vicissitudes of discourse, reception, and history; they are permeable, like the translucent pages of the book, to conditions of context and circumstance, including and especially the obfuscating misreadings of well-meaning art historians.

In one sense, however, Celant's historical error does prove partially correct. A version of the book on white paper did exist, in the form of promotional postcards that Manzoni distributed himself in 1962.³¹³ The cards featured an image of the typography for the cover, and therefore, in a literal sense, each postcard did in fact include the entire text of the book. If a work of art in the form of a monograph incorporates a site of discursive reception into its very logic, it is all the more fitting that its first incarnation should come in the form of advertising materials, linking the critical commentary that comes *after* the book to the promotional chatter that comes *before*. It is as though the storied unity of the work-of-art were displaced by its own meta-discourse, squeezed out between the P.R. propaganda that precedes it and the cultural propaganda that succeed it.

³¹² At least one copy of this 1963 edition is still extant, and is currently held in the collection of the Dutch artist Herman de Vries in Germany. Author's conversation with Herman de Vries.

³¹³ Unpublished correspondence, dated February 2, 1962, from Manzoni to Petersen (Archivio Piero Manzoni).

Like its author, the work disappears, existing only in the discursive and economic interests that sustain it.

Artist's Books Circa 1960

Manzoni was certainly no stranger to artist's books, and *Life and Work* calls to mind a variety of books by artists that proliferated in the decade before and after Manzoni's blank monograph.

Around 1960, for instance, his Swiss friend Carl Lazslo assembled hundreds of lithographs, photographs, drawings, etchings, and other works on paper by a multitude of European artists into the book *La Lune En Rodage*. Manzoni contributed a cork imprint on white velvety paper, a gridded arrangement of pockmarked blocks that recalls his other achromes in polystyrene.³¹⁴ Lazslo's monumental project, the fruit of years of work, resulted in an enormous, delicate tome released in an edition of 150. Although many artists contributed works that are by nature reproducible (prints, photos, etc.), there are also many that are one-of-a-kind, and therefore, unlike *Life and Work*, each volume of *La Lune En Rodage* is completely unique. Its lavish pages anchor the book-form in its materiality, but only to fetishize that material as a precious and indeed auratic object.

Uniqueness, authenticity, and reproducibility are frequently at stake in artist's books, as they were in Yves Klein's book of readymade monochromes from 1954 entitled *Yves Peintures*. In this little book, a piece of colored paper pasted to each page is supposed to represent a monochrome painting. Although Klein would go on to produce a

³¹⁴ The starting resemblance of Styrofoam and cork in this connection reinforces the organic-synthetic dialectic that is the subject of Chapter Three of this dissertation. In fact, it was only because I first mistook the cellular cork imprint for polystyrene foam that the connection first occurred to me.

great many monochrome paintings, some in proportions and colors similar to those pictured in his book, in 1954 all of them had yet to be executed. In other words, each page bears a miniature reproduction of an original that does not exist. These miniature reproductions—these false doubles—also change from one volume to the next.³¹⁵ No set of monochromes miniatures is the same, so like *La Lune En Rodage*, each version of *Yves Peintures* is one-of-a-kind.

Manzoni would certainly have been aware of Klein's book as he worked on *Life and Work*, and in fact, the two books share many aspects in common. If Klein's is a book of Monochromes, for instance, Manzoni's could be called a book of Achromes. *Yves Peintures*, like *Life and Work*, also plays onomastic games, since its introduction lists its author as Pascal Claude, an inversion of the actual name of its writer, Claude Pascal. The introduction itself is composed solely of black lines where text should be, a negation of semantic referentiality and textual communicability whose radicality is eclipsed only by the total absence of ink inside Manzoni's book. Like Klein's little pasted slips of paper, which claim to represent paintings that never existed, so too does Manzoni's typographical game promise a text that refuses to appear. Both works leverage modernist reductivism for a joke about work and fraud in the metadiscursive spaces of modernism. This early offering of Klein's is probably closer to Manzoni's practice than any of his other works, especially since it flaunts a brazen lie without the spiritual claptrap for which Klein's later work has become so infamous (and so popular).

³¹⁵ The tipped-in monochrome papers are slightly different in each volume of the book. The colored pages come in a completely different order in each booklet, and sometimes the number and size of the monochromes will also change. For instance, the volume dedicated to Mr. Oshita is unique in that it contains two identical grey swatches. The monochromes in the volume dedicated to Hansjörg Gisiger are all the same size, unlike all others where they vary in dimensions. See the images on the website of the Yves Klein Archives, http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/works/works22_us.html, accessed 12 March 2014.

During this period Manzoni was also in contact with Dieter Rot, whose artist's books of the later 1950's radically reduced their textual elements to a few tiny letters, as in *ideogramme* (1959) or *bok 1956-59* (1959).³¹⁶ In several pages of these volumes, Rot eschews ink altogether, instead marking the page with punched holes, thereby physicalizing the graphical and conceptual "spacing" on which writing is based. In their blankness and the materiality of their spacing, Rot's work provides a key precedent for Manzoni's book.

Like printed plastic, hole-punched pages could also be difficult to produce, and Rot's work sometimes suffered technical delays. His contribution to La Monte Young's *Anthology of Chance Operations* in 1963 was planned as a piece of black card punched with holes of various sizes, inserted into the leaves of the book. The difficulty and expense of acquiring and die-cutting the black card stock caused major delays for the *Anthology*, and eventually resulted in a compromise: despite the fact that the book labels it "black page with holes," the squarish piece inserted into the 1963 edition had to be made of white paper.

Clearly illegible, *Life and Work* should also be catalogued among a number of negated or negating books produced around this time, many of which adopted markedly aggressive strategies. Jasper Johns, for example, having already painted over newsprint in many paintings, in 1957 smothered an open, wall-mounted book in encaustic of primary colors (Fig. 61). The wax-based paint is variably translucent depending on the heaviness of application, and thus the red overpainting obscures the book's text just enough to elicit—and continually frustrate—the desire to read the words that peek out

³¹⁶ Dieter Rot, *Bücher und Grafik (1. Teil): Aus den Jahren 1947 bis 1971. Dieter Rot: Collected Works, Vol. 20*, ed. H.J. Mayer, D. Rot, and H. Sohm (London: Edition Hansjörg Mayer, 1972), unpaginated.

teasingly through the pigment. Johns' book is arrested between legibility and illegibility, discursive text and aesthetic object; Leo Steinberg aptly called it "a paralyzed book in a boxed frame."³¹⁷ By submerging its text in the occlusive strokes of encaustic, Johns instrumentalizes a book as the literal support for painting. Physically inserting the material vehicle for writing into the apparatus of painting suddenly makes reading impossible.



Figure 61. Jasper Johns. Book. 1957

Painting wasn't the only medium that could make a book literally unreadable. Late 1963 (the year of *Life and Work*) also saw Manzoni's friend Marcel Broodthaers renounce poetry for what he called the

"insincerity" of the visual arts, a transition he

registered early in '64 by interring 50 copies of his underselling poetic bestiary *Pense-Bête* [*Memory-Aid*] in plaster (Fig. 62). Facing in different directions, some with torn pages and covers, the books are crowded against one another in a disorderly fashion. They stand vertically within a mound of lumpy whitish plaster, the edges of which, worked and re-worked by pawing fingers, smear their way onto the black covers. One end of the plaster is molded into a bulbous ball-shaped bookend supported by a plastic sphere, while the other, trailing off beyond the books like a gnarled and beastly tail, terminates in a smaller bulb. It is as though the books had careened, *en masse*, into a ball of wet plaster, skidding to a halt atop a pedestal base. And halt they have, arrested as they are within their cretaceous confinement. It is a decrepit monument to stoppage, to

³¹⁷ Leo Steinberg, "Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 19.

arrest, to the cessation of writing, to the end of reading, or the beginning of their impossibility.



Figure 62. Marcel Broodthaers. *Pense-Bête*. 1964

A more optimistic but no less materially hostile approach marked the joint project of Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, who collaborated on the celebrated volume *Mémoires* in 1959 (Fig. 63). This book, though prolix, challenged the protocols of reading through broken fragments of text spattered in ejaculatory spurts of color. The artists also bound their book in a jacket of heavy-duty sandpaper. They understood that reading is not solely an optical exercise; a book must be handled, moved, laid on surfaces, and shelved for future reference. The aggressive textuality of its interior is matched, and even outstripped, by the aggressive textuality of its exterior. It makes its materiality felt. It abrades the hand, scratches fine surfaces, and, perhaps most destructively, tears at its neighbors on the bookshelf. *Mémoires* is dangerous to other books. It leaves a mark quite literally on its literary milieu, even and especially when closed shut, and in the very act of being housed in an archive. Sandpaper also breaks down with repeated use, and so even as this book abrades adjacent surfaces, its own surface degrades. As a rare species of object, this fractious, factious little memoir must be handled with care.

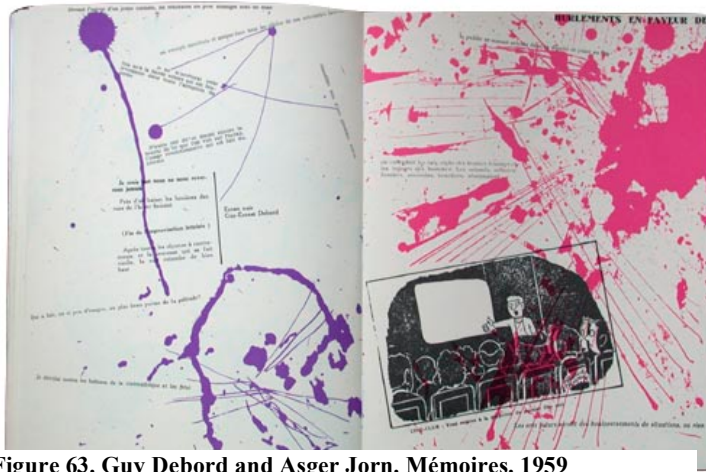


Figure 63. Guy Debord and Asger Jorn. *Mémoires*. 1959

These books share an aggressive materiality that to some degree disrupts legibility. Johns submerges a book in the materials of paint, complete with frame; Broodthaers inters books

in the materials of sculpture, complete with pedestal. Neither can be read. In these two cases at least, the entry of language into aesthetic practice—which would be hailed as ‘dematerialization’ later in the sixties—turns out to be the crude, literal transposition of the discursive vehicle into the physical apparatus of traditional art objects. In these works as in Manzoni’s *Life and Work*, the subtraction of legibility enhances the material dimension of the book itself. As Benjamin Buchloh puts it, “To the degree that the semantic and lexical dimension of poetry is annihilated, the plasticity and presence of the artifact was paradoxically increased.”³¹⁸

If the typographic experiments of Debord and Jorn troubled reading in a more politically direct fashion, they look rather naïve in retrospect. The distribution of the fragments of text across the page, juxtaposed against and among reproductions of photographs, disrupted the continuity of the text while still preserving vestiges of legibility and referentiality (both linguistic and iconic), a reemergence of the old avant-garde optimism in the shock of montage-effects. The utopian spirit thrives here for one last moment, even as the degradation of its text and images by means of their technical

³¹⁸ Buchloh, “Marcel Broodthaers: Open Letters, Industrial Poems,” in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 81.

reproduction hints at utopianism's imminent dissolution. Degraded and degrading, its sandpaper cover insisted simultaneously on the hostility of this book to all its dusty neighbors on the shelves; it is a youthfully biblioclastic gesture, as though a book about revolution could actually pose the threat of one. Manzoni's text does not share in this Situationist spirit, and although it certainly cites precedents in the historical avant-garde, its blankness refuses not only communication, but also the revolutionary utopianism that that refusal once heralded.

Illegible Precedents, Empty Presents

By and/or On Mallarmé

These innovative and often illegible books flutter around the historical period in which Manzoni conceived his monograph, but all of these books have older ancestors in the historical avant-garde. In their assertion of materiality, in the ways they trouble reading, and especially in the blankness of their spaces, all these books ultimately trace their lineage to Stéphane Mallarmé.³¹⁹ Mallarmé's celebrated work *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1897/1914)³²⁰ forever altered typographical inscription by intervening directly upon the arrangement, the size, the order, and the spacing of the printed word (Fig. 64). Dispersing the poem across the surface of its pages, the lines of *Un Coup de dés* break off, only to pick up pages later, linked visually by typefaces of

³¹⁹ Massot penned a history of French poetry entitled *De Mallarmé à 391*, linking the 19th century symbolist to Picabia's dada periodical of the 1910's and 20's. Pierre de Massot, *De Mallarmé à 391* (Saint-Raphaël, Var : Au Bel exemplaire, 1922).

³²⁰ Mallarmé's poem was first published in *Cosmopolitain* in 1897, but in conventional typographical arrangement. It was not until 1914 that the poem was set and printed in the novel typography for which it has become so well-known. See Rachel Haidu, *The Absence of Work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964-1976* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), p. 299-300.

comparable size. Words cascade down the page like the abyssal waters they describe, later leaping across the break in the page and back again, mirroring one another across the fold. Radical though the rearrangement of words may have been, *Un Coup de dés* is probably best remembered for what the words leave out: the spaces that separate them. Mallarmé himself explained in the preface to the poem, “The blanks indeed take on importance, at first glance; the versification demands them, as a surrounding silence...The paper intervenes each time as an image of itself...” It is in the gaps between words, between lines, between pages that Mallarmé’s poem articulates itself, foreshadowing the centrality of spacing in the linguistic and aesthetic developments in the century that followed.



Figure 64. Stéphane Mallarmé. *Un Coup de dés* (interior pages). 1914

What Mallarmé’s spacing allowed was the escape of the word—the poetic text—from the universal conditions of instrumentality that seemed everywhere to threaten it in the nineteenth century (especially in the *bête noire* of journalistic writing). This freedom, however, came at a cost. Maurice Blanchot first identified the “insurmountable paradox” at the heart of Mallarmé’s spacing: that to drive words “toward a signification free of any concrete reference,” the spacing would become “the material emblem of a silence that, to

let itself be represented, *must become a thing*...[language] must become like things in order to break our natural relationships with them.”³²¹ Benjamin Buchloh has elaborated this dialectic along even more specific historical lines. He explains,

But that spatialization—motivated precisely by the desire for the semblance of an absolute autonomy of the textual—was achieved at the price of an artificial anomie resulting from the destruction of meaning and the erasure of memory from the semantic axis of language. This insistence on the demonstration of an autonomous physicality and pure semiotic opacity of language within the universe of instrumentalized speech therefore transformed the very opponent of reification—poetic language—into mute plasticity and objecthood.³²²

Mallarmé’s symbolist desire to flee instrumentality led him to intervene on the poem in its typographic manifestation, which announced the dialectic that would haunt avant-garde practice for the following century at least: to the degree that a work of art retreats from the conditions of instrumentality and reification that increasingly defined social relations generally, so too does it lose its capacity for communication and memory-work, delivering it over to the very forces and interests it had sought to escape.

³²¹ Maurice Blanchot, “The Myth of Mallarmé,” *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 31, 37 (originally published in *Le Part du feu*, Editions Gallimard, 1949) (emphasis mine).

³²² Buchloh, “Marcel Broodthaers: Open Letters, Industrial Poems,” p. 72; Buchloh’s reading seems in part predicated on the work of Blanchot, for whom Mallarmé was a figure of obsessive return. Blanchot writes, “The commonplace, from whom usage Mallarmé desperately fled, has precisely this defect of not offering a strong enough barrier against facts, things, what we see, what we hear...If language’s distinctive feature is to nullify the presence it signifies, then transparency, clarity, commonplaces are contrary to it, because they thwart its progress toward a signification free of any concrete reference.” And yet, this flight from the limitations of referentiality, which so often involved the white space of page that Mallarmé praised, necessitated a contradiction. Blanchot continues, “This ‘spaced design of commas and periods...bare melody,’ preferred over words with a light irony that one undoubtedly should not misjudge, is perhaps the last trace of a language that erases itself, the very moment of its disappearance, but it again seems even more to be the material emblem of a silence that, to let itself be represented, *must become a thing*, and that thus remains a scandal, its insurmountable paradox.” See Blanchot, “The Myth of Mallarmé,” *The Work of Fire*, p. 31, 37 (emphasis mine).

Although Mallarmé's reception is a point to which this chapter will return, suffice it to say for now that the impact of his typographical intervention on the art and theory of the twentieth century is difficult to overstate. Mallarmé threw his dice into the farthest corners of modernist practice, and their continual resurfacing owes little enough to chance. Manzoni's turn on spacing, absence, and erasure, however, begs comparison to a slightly later descendent of Mallarmé's poem in the work of Marcel Broodthaers.

Broodthaers would make explicit a genealogical relation to Mallarmé in his 1969 reworking of *Un Coup De Dés*, a near facsimile of Mallarmé's poem in which the typography is blacked out. Not unlike Pascal's foreword to *Yves Peintures* or the erased books of Emilio Isgrò, Broodthaers substitutes solid black rectangular bars for the text of Mallarmé's poem.³²³ The arrangement and dimensions of these bars, which usually appear as horizontal black lines, remains more or less faithful to Mallarmé's specifications: when the text is large, for example, the black bars also swell in size. When the text appears in italics, each substituted bar slants dutifully to the right into an elongated rhombus.

A point that often goes unremarked in the literature on this piece is that many of Broodthaers *Un Coup de dés* were printed on semitransparent tracing paper (Fig. 65).³²⁴ Although the artist's most obvious intervention is of course the blacking-out of

³²³ The Italian artist Emilio Isgrò would begin crossing out the words of entire books later in the sixties. See *Emilio Isgrò: La Cancellatura e altre soluzioni*, ed. Alberto Fiz (Milano: Skira, 2007).

³²⁴ In the first edition, ten were printed on anodized aluminum and ninety on translucent paper, while another 300 were issued on opaque white paper. For a detailed and convincing discussion of this work, including the translucent version, see Haidu, *The Absence of Work*, pp. 63-105; see also Anne Rorimer, "The Exhibition at the MTL Gallery in Brussels, March 13 – April 10, 1970," *October*, Vol. 42, *Marcel Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs* (Autumn, 1987), pp. 101-125.

Mallarmé's text, the milky transparency of the tracing paper edition also introduces several important distinctions. First of all, the reader sees through several pages at once, such that the horizontal black delineations pile up against one another like a series of artfully arranged stacks receding into the obscurity of increasingly whitish depth. Secondly, the tracing paper is printed only on one side, so that as we turn over each page, we see its reversed image almost as crisply and clearly as its obverse. One-sided printing renders a double-sided image, each blacked-out page visible in obverse and reverse. As a result, we have to turn the page twice as often in the Broodthaers as in the Mallarmé.

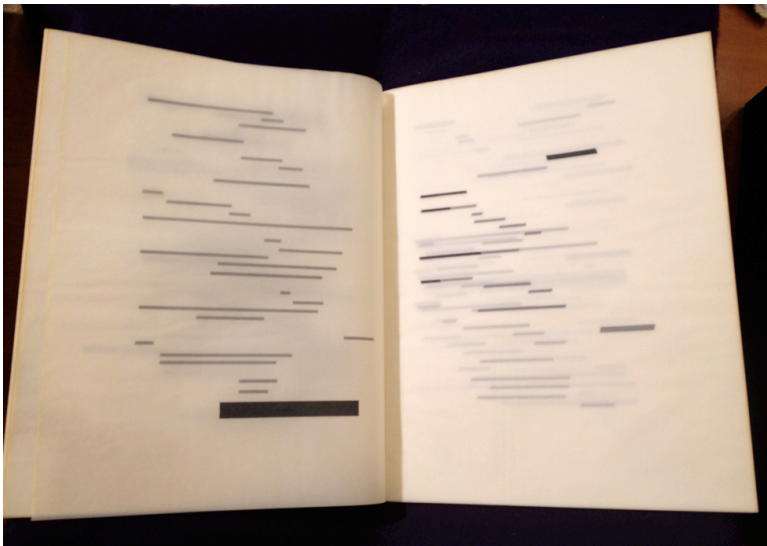


Figure 65. Marcel Broodthaers. *Un Coup de dés*. 1969.

It has been noted that Mallarmé's text plays not only across the surface of the paper but also across the break of the page. In the Broodthaers, however, one-sided printing necessitates that this play proceed as a series of discrete page-pairings punctuated in between by their mirrored reversals. Of course, the Mallarmé could also be seen as a concatenation of page-pairings facing off across the fold, but in Broodthaers' redux, each page also peers behind it at the backside of another page with which Mallarmé never meant it to be paired. Reversed as if in a mirror, these half-pairs abut

one another rump-to-rump. Turning from one pairing to the next is interrupted each time by an encounter of reverse-images, in which the flipside of one page (one half of one pair) faces off against the flipside of another. Owing to the transparency of the pages, these uncanny reversals and backside pairings are set against a multitude of black stacked lines, half of which, it would seem, are also reversals.

From Saussure we know that all language is predicated on difference and exclusion, that linguistic signifiers have no positive value. From Derrida, in turn, we know that it is in the space between signs—in the literal and conceptual difference that their spacing enables—that the very possibility for signification arises. Both of these lessons may have been derived from Mallarmé, and indeed, it is Mallarmé's spaces that intervene upon the text (far more than the other way around), driving its form and forcing negativity to the fore. For Broodthaers, however, even the formal variety and semantic specificity of the words themselves must be abolished. The interlacing of letter and page is replaced by a war of black bars and white space, a clarified difference in angular black-and-white intervals, hence his substitution of the word "Image" for "Poème" on the title-page.

But if Mallarmé's whiteness reversed the hierarchy of sign and space, Broodthaers' semitransparency also reverses the image of each page. Each page is doubled, visible from behind, and each black mark bleeds through the page to be visible on two of its faces—a singular mark that continually splits off into twosomes, as though enacting the doubling that is the condition of the sign, the splitting of every semiotic unit into signifier and signified. Broodthaers' paper also permits us to see through the page as a "tissue of quotations," as the traces of other lines, other pages, emerge through the

white space to crowd around each black mark.³²⁵ Each page is only legible in a blur of the others that come before and after, each negated word set within the infinitely receding others that are its constitutive exclusions: the chain of signification, abyssal as the seas of Mallarmé's poem.

By and/or On Duchamp

In the context of authorial subversion, and semiotic stoppage that characterizes *Life and*



Works, it comes as no surprise that a key figure must also be the ineluctable Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp provides a model of criticality markedly different from Mallarmé's, and yet Manzoni's anti-monograph deftly overlays Mallarmé's constitutive spacing and radical reduction with Duchamp's wry interventions in the discursive and institutional destinations of artworks. *Life and Works* calls to mind three

Figure 66. Marcel Duchamp. Unhappy Readymade. 1919

works by or about Marcel Duchamp, each of which intersects

with *Life and Work* at a different angle: the *Unhappy Readymade* (1919), *The Wonderful Book* by Pierre de Massot, and (perhaps most importantly of all), the *Boite-en-Valise* (1935-40).

The first of these appeared in 1919, when Duchamp gave his sister Suzanne the *Unhappy Readymade* as a wedding present. Writing from Buenos-Aires, Marcel instructed Suzanne to take a geometry textbook and suspend it from the balcony of her Paris apartment (Fig. 66). Exposed to the elements like an unwanted Athenian infant, the

³²⁵ I am obviously citing (and literalizing, with Broodthaers) Barthes famous phrase from "The Death of the Author," *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 146.

Euclidean formulae faded in the sun and rain as winds battered and tore the pages. Chance operations, which in *Three Standard Stoppages* took the relatively innocuous form of gravitational pull, suddenly take on an aggressive quality as meteorological phenomena, slowly and tortuously destroying a material site of mathematical discourse. In all the negated books that *Life and Works* evokes, there is no more violent repudiation of ordered sign-systems and their material vehicles than this, the most infelicitous of Duchamp's readymades.

If chance operations function for Duchamp in the production of the work, in Manzoni's work, chance is deferred onto the processes of perception, since the appearance of the book depends entirely on its context: one can see right through each page to whatever happens to be behind it.

Five years later, in 1924, Duchamp himself received a book as a present, *The Wonderful Book: Reflections on Rose Sélavy* by Pierre de Massot (Fig. 67, 68). A protégé of Francis Picabia, Massot was a frequent friend and lover to luminaries of the French avant-garde in the 1920's, counting Andre Gide and Jean Cocteau among his companions. Although this book is awkward and somewhat overwrought, Massot's gift establishes an important precedent for Manzoni's *Life and Work*, since despite the fact that its title promises a meditation on Duchamp's alter-ego, a monograph in the form of "reflection," most of its pages are nearly blank. There is plenty of text on the cover page, the dedication, the introduction, and the postscript (the latter by Rose Sélavy herself), but the twelve pages that comprise body of the text itself are almost completely vacant, save for the name of a month printed at the top of each page. These spacings obviously

owe much to Mallarmé, and indeed, Massot had already written a history of French poetry that began with him.

Even before its minimalized and calendric “reflections,” however, the notion of nothingness and its appearance are established early in the book. Just as one might expect, under the heading “By the Same Author / Works Published” we read the names of Massot’s other books. However, under the heading “To Appear,”—ostensibly promising future books—all we read is the word *Nothing*. “To Appear / Nothing.” Nothing, ironically enough, is to appear.

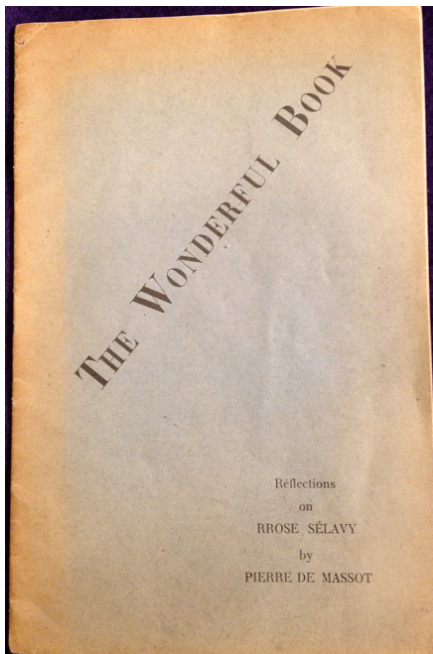


Figure 67. Pierre de Massot. *The Wonderful Book: Reflections on Rrose Sélavy* (cover). 1924

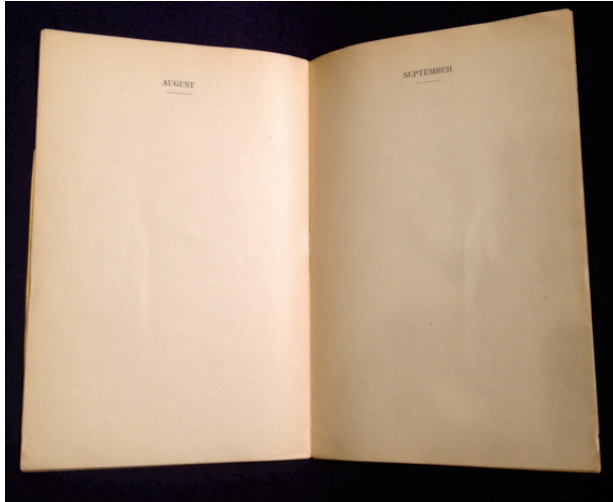


Figure 68. Pierre de Massot. *The Wonderful Book: Reflections on Rose Sélavy* (interior pages). 1924

Not unlike *Life and Work* and *Yves Peintures*, *The Wonderful Book* also plays a number of tricks with names and authorship, not to mention (apropos of Rose, if not Piero) a number of games with gender. The author of the brief introduction is named only as “A Woman of No Importance,” an appellation drawn from Oscar Wilde’s 1893 play of the same title. The introduction narrates the story of the book’s development, telling of Massot’s tortured hesitation, his protracted procrastination, and finally his triumphant presentation of the book. It reads, in part: “To speak about the youth, the evolution, the work and especially the life of Marcel Duchamp without blundering! Might one not well hesitate? Anybody would hesitate! The thing is impossible.” Monography, which is also the putative project of *Life and Work*, is cast as an impossible task, especially when the artist in question is a Duchampian one.³²⁶

³²⁶ The writer of the introduction, this woman of no importance, writes in the first person, and refers to Massot and Duchamp in the third. She gives their names as “P. de M.” and “MARCEL DUCHAMP,” typographically abbreviating Massot, whom she calls a “lazy, naughty little boy,” while typographically aggrandizing Duchamp, whose name she prints in capital letters. The name Rose Sélavy, strangely enough, appears nowhere in the introduction.

But who is this “woman of no importance?” Sélavy herself? Massot in authorial drag? Some other? In this book about a woman who is not a woman—a man who goes under a female pseudonym—the author of the preface is denied her name. Identified only by her gender, she is assessed as having no importance, as if this lack of status could explain the absent name for which the gender and the assessment substitute. As a woman of no importance, in other words, she will remain nameless. Women of importance may indeed exist, and might even therefore warrant the dignity of the name, but this woman, it seems, is not one of them.

In addition to Rose and the anonymous writer, there is a third woman involved here as well. Appearing even before the introduction and called explicitly by name, Gertrude Stein provides the epigraph to Massot’s book. Stein apparently is a woman of some importance, if indeed she can be named a woman at all, since gender and naming are so linked and troubled here. Because her little epigraph takes up many of the issues surrounding the name, the author, the artist, and the monograph at stake in both *The Wonderful Book* and *Life and Works*, it is worth an analysis here.

“I was looking to see if I could make Marcel out of it,” she writes, “but I can’t.”

She was “looking to see,” in the sense of trying to do something, of making an attempt. An effort, a labor, is cast in the guise of sight and visibility. She was “looking to see if [she] could make Marcel out of it.”

The phrase “make Marcel out of it” allows for several different readings. Firstly, following on the heels of a metaphor of vision, “making out Marcel” might signify an attempt literally to see him, to recognize him, or to apprehend his image, as though on a foggy day or in a blurred photograph. Secondly, to “make Marcel out of it” might refer

to the name, to the word *Marcel* itself, as though she were trying to arrange some set of readymade letters to spell out the name of the artist. Duchamp himself played this game, as Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, since we can make out Marcel in the title of the Large Glass : *La Marié...celibataires, meme* (1915-23), a split spelling of the artist's name MAR/CEL buried in the title of his unfinished opus. Lastly, to "make Marcel" could also mean the act of constructing Marcel or something resembling him—a portrait perhaps—as though the labor in question constituted a constitutory assay, an attempt at re/producing the subjectivity of Marcel. These various readings depend largely on what "it" refers to: "to make Marcel out of *it*." Out of what? Out of clay, of paint, of pages, of letters, of signs, of ideas? What is "it," and how do we make Marcel?

The quotation may mean any or all of these things, but nevertheless it is all in vain: "I was looking to see if I might make Marcel out of it *but I can't*." The allusive promiscuity of her first two clauses only amplifies the declaration of failure in her third: Stein cannot see, cannot spell, cannot make Marcel. The subject, her object, and its apprehension elude her at every turn. For the reader as well, seeking for Duchamp or Sélavy or their "reflections" in Massot's text renders only a sequence of absences. The top of each page is marked by the name of a month—each page passing like a unit of time—and the blankness below it multiplies in the temporal turning of paper leaves. We look for Duchamp, but we find nothing there. For Stein and for the reader as for the woman-of-no-importance, "the thing is impossible."

Impossible or not, Duchamp himself undertook the task of his own monograph between 1935 and 1940 with *Boite-en-Valise*, the suitcases of miniature reproductions that he made in a deluxe edition of twenty (Fig. 69). Each case contains tiny duplicates

of Duchamp's artworks, from the early portraits of his family through the readymades and beyond. Two-dimensional works are reproduced in a hybrid technique of mechanical printing and hand-coloring, while three-dimensional works appear like doll-sized versions of their originals. Of course, the status of "originality" and reproducibility are obviously in great crisis here, as both readymade commodities and unique auratic paintings get refracted through the deliberately complicated contingencies of multiplication. Like *Life and Work*, *Boite-en-Valise* is an auto-monograph, an anti-monograph of sorts, which solicits authorship and authenticity within the context of a work that grounds itself in the forms of its own reception.³²⁷

Of all the ancestors and descendants for *Life and Work*, of all the other works of art that its form and function call to mind, *Boite-en-Valise* may be the most significant, not least because it was first conceived as a book. As Duchamp described the project to Pierre Cabanne:

Instead of painting something new, my aim was to reproduce the paintings and the objects that I liked and collect them in a space as small as possible. I did not know how to go about it. I first thought of a book, but I did not like the idea. Then it occurred to me that it could be a box in which all my works could be collected and mounted like in a small museum, a portable museum, so to speak.³²⁸

If this work is to succeed as an oeuvre in miniature, Duchamp must collect reproductions of his works and compress them together into a diminutive and portable container.

Although he rejects the idea, his first thought is of a book, which jockeys with the

³²⁷ For important and various readings of this work, see Benjamin Buchloh, "The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers," in ed. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale, *Museums by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), David Joselit, *Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp 1910-1941* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), and T.J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

³²⁸ Quoted in Buchloh, "The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers," p. 45.

museum in his mind as the most obvious and immediate site of collection, reproduction, and reception for works of art.



Figure 69. Marcel Duchamp. *Boite-en-valise*. 1935-40

In both Duchamp's *Boite* and Manzoni's book, the work of art and the conditions of its reception collide. Buchloh has noted in *Boite-en-Valise* "the artist's concern to integrate within the conception of a work, the final forms of distribution and the conditions of reception and acculturation, the modes of reading that ensue from them and that are contained within the practices of institutionalization."³²⁹ In other words, the work itself anticipates the site of reception, absorbing it into its very structure. The work takes notice of the inevitable processes and spaces by and in which it will be domesticated and fetishized, the ways in which its radical potential will be neutralized in the absorptive apparatus of culture.

Life and Work also collapses the site of reception and acculturation into the work

³²⁹ Buchloh, "The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers," p. 45.

of art itself, but whereas for Duchamp that site passes from the book to the museum, for Manzoni it remains the book. For Buchloh as for Duchamp and later Broodthaers, the museum is both the literal location of institutionalization and also the figure for the process of acculturation in general. The museum serves here as both metonym and synecdoche for the social relations we often call “institutions” that may or may not take architectural form. In a similar way, the book also serves metonymically to stand for a parallel social relation: “discourse.”³³⁰ Museums are not the only places where works of art are domesticated, and indeed it is in their discursive elaboration that art and authorship can be historically sustained.

The words on the cover identify this volume as a monograph about Piero Manzoni, a book about his life and his works of art. If a monograph is a principal vehicle through which artistic activity is traditionally received, registered, and transmitted, then in generating a monograph about himself as the art object itself, Manzoni plays several roles at once. Manzoni is both the book’s writer (author whose text is an act of reception) and its subject (the producing artist about whom the volume is written); he simultaneously plays the roles of artist and critic, of producer and receiver. Furthermore, the book is an art object that claims to be the source of information about a body of work of which the book itself is part. The book is both a fragment of a larger body of work and a literary

³³⁰ We often pair the words “discourse” and “institution” to cover our bases, and although we may recognize that the two are entwined, their very pairing can often suggest a material/immaterial dyad, as though discourse were the immaterial soul that inhabits the material body of institutions. Discourse cannot be thought without its institutions (from grammar to magazines, from languages to universities), just as institutions cannot be thought without the discursive activity that brought them into being, produce and mediate their social function, and inevitably bring them into historical decline. In each case, the site and processes of reception demand a material substrate that is specific to but not exhausted by its historical moment.

form that claims to contain the wholeness of that entire body—the totality of a life and a life’s work.

At a considerable distance from anything resembling autonomy, Manzoni therefore acknowledges that works of art are always-already situated in the discursive networks that determine their development, that the work is always ineluctably tied to the allegedly separate realms of reception and commentary, in this case scholarship, criticism, and art historiography.³³¹

A monograph, as the word itself intimates, is one of those hoary old sites wherein language and its apparatuses conspire to conjure the Author, the Artist, the Subject, the Work, the Oeuvre, and other ultimately theological figures of a humanist unity that even after the interventions of Marx and Nietzsche (not to mention Manet and Duchamp) might have continued to seem remotely plausible were it not for their historical implosion with the World Wars and their all-too-modern horrors. If an artist were interested in attacking the unity of subjectivity (artistic and otherwise) at the intersection of art and language, the monograph—literally the *writing* of the *One*—would be an apt locus to do so. Author, Artist, Subject, Object, Work, Life, and Oeuvre all coincide here in *Piero Manzoni: Life and Works*, but in radically negated form. This little volume insidiously collapses all of these categories into a single object in order to strike at them all in one devastating blow. Piero Manzoni’s life and work were inevitably bound for the discursive fate of all works of art and the related notion of their authors. All his works—

³³¹Claes Oldenburg undertook a similar elision of aesthetic spaces with *Store* (1961), a combination of studio and gallery in which he hawked a multitude of decrepit sculptures like so many dime-store commodities. If Oldenburg collapsed institutional sites of artistic production and commercial consumption, Manzoni collapses sites of artistic production and discursive reception with *Life and Works*, the artwork as monograph. Dan Graham would enact a comparable collapse years later in 1966, though more radically perhaps, with *Homes for America*, an article-as-work in the Heartfeldian tradition of the magazine as distribution-form.

and his life itself—end up contained in a book, whose pages are as empty as they are transparent.

In this connection, Buchloh uses the phrase "false neutrality" to describe both the wall of a museum and the page of a book.³³² Both are traditionally defined by their whiteness, their mythic monochrome space that conceals ideology and ownership behind a curtain of white. The white space of the page had already been a site much intervened-upon in the history of art. Mallarmé had revealed its material necessity in the aesthetics of typography and scansion. Cubist collage had cajoled it into active participation in the construction of images, through negative spacing, tautological occlusion, and other means. Dada photomontage had electrified it as the synaptic gap between decontextualized fragments. In each case, it is the specificity of white, its opacity and achromaticity, that enables the page to do its work, or better, to disclose the work it had been doing all along in secret. The same would be true for the museum wall, the site of intervention for Daniel Buren, and the critique of Brian O'Doherty's "White Cube" of a few years later.

Therefore it is all the more startling that it is here, on and in the page, that Piero Manzoni, purveyor of white surfaces, of Achromes of all kinds, should forego pale opacity in favor of transparencies. Not only is the book denied its body, the text, but its pages are even deprived of those clean white spaces that might neutralize the absence of ink. Once again, Manzoni throws us back upon the material facticity of the object itself, the "site of discourse" that is no longer an abstract topos or "structure," but a physical object with certain discernable properties. Light passes through each empty page,

³³² Buchloh, "The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers." The exact words are, "...the false neutrality of a traditional documentation of his work in a book format...", p. 46, and "...the false neutrality of the wall space," p. 51.

revealing on and through its surfaces the circumstances of its apprehension: the hand that turns the page, the fingers that leave their prints, the table that supports the book, the room where one sits “reading.”

A stack of plastic transparencies also brings an unexpected twist: when the book is closed, its pages pile up in such a way that the book becomes a perfect mirror. To gaze down at the book on a tabletop is to see yourself gazing right back. Although individual pages permit light to pass unencumbered, as a group they do the opposite, reflecting light with perfect fidelity.

If we can say, with Saussure, that language has no positive terms, then this particular discursive space doesn’t even try. Its appearance, all that is visible in its pages, is fully contingent on the historical conditions at such as time as it might be picked up and read. In eschewing paper for the synthetic clarity of plastic, Manzoni pierces the white veil, just as the light penetrates the pages, revealing the contingency of the cultural space, its fickle receptivity to contextual pressures of all kinds.

These optical conditions of the object also cause a collision of two orders of visibility: the vertical plane of a painting and the horizontal plane of graphic inscription. Walter Benjamin distinguishes these orientations,

We might say that there are two sections through the substance of the world: the longitudinal section of painting and the transverse section of certain graphic works. The longitudinal section seems representational—it somehow contains things; the transverse system seems symbolic—it contains signs.³³³

³³³ Walter Benjamin, “Painting and the Graphic Arts,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 219.

Benjamin thus makes a semiotic distinction between verticality and horizontality, the former the world of the icon and painting, and the latter the arena of the symbol and printing.³³⁴ Manzoni's work oscillates between both orientations, just as it flickers between reflectivity and transparency. As the window on the world which is also the mirror of nature, the surface of an Albertian painting had traditionally dissolved before the gaze to render lush illusions of "things." In *Life and Works*, however, the singularity of the diaphane multiplies into a plastic pile, slipping off the wall in the process to rest in the horizontal posture of the sign. But in its twinned flashes of refraction and reflection, the printer's flatbed also refuses to deliver the marks that are its purview, instead playing the painting's role of relaying images of the world beyond its lens. A painting and a book encounter one another in a vacuous synthesis. Abashed to play both page and mimic, the book empties itself to the indexical now.

In the Name of the Publisher

Like Duchamp, Manzoni undertakes the process of his own monograph, a self-reflexive operation about the acculturation of works of art and the mutual fetishization of author and oeuvre. But unlike Duchamp, Manzoni lists someone else as the author. We cannot rightly credit Petersen with any role but publisher, and yet Manzoni explicitly specified that Petersen's name, and not his, appear above the title. The onomastic displacement is both provocative and deliberately confusing. Under what name do we file this title? Who makes a book, it seems to ask, and who gets credit? Is the maker of books an individual person, or perhaps something less discrete and anthropocentric?

³³⁴ Benjamin also relegates certain drawings to the horizontal plane. He emphasizes those that depart from strict mimesis, like children's drawings and the caricatures of George Grosz, thus confirming the symbolic character of this axis.

What name do we give the maker of books, and what rights and claims does that name entail?

Life and Works questions authorship on multiple levels, but the specific operation of the name-change has several discernible consequences. First, on a philosophical level, it constitutes a critique of the Author as an individual, whole, and autonomous subject. Traditionally, works of art are attributed to the individual creativity of a single artist, identified by the name. By replacing one name with another, Manzoni calls into question the singularity of the discrete Cartesian subjectivity from whose creative thought the work of art was thought to issue. Broodthaers would undertake a similar switch—in the opposite direction, however—when he replaced Mallarmé’s name with his own on the cover of the 1969 *Un Coup de dés*, thereby soliciting the authorial self with an appropriative usurpation of the author-slot.

The name-change also takes its place in a long avant-garde tradition of authorial critique predicated on name-alteration. It recalls Duchamp’s assumption of the name Rrose Sélavy, the female pseudonym with which the anti-patriarch frequently signed his works, or Max Ernst’s Loplop, a birdlike creature Ernst assumed as an artistic identity. Name-alterations also abound in the sixties, not least with Dieter Rot’s continuous reorganization of the spelling of his name (Diter Rot, Dieter Roth), or the orthographic inconsistencies of Warhol’s signature, occasionally appearing as “Warhola,” especially when he had his mother execute the autograph.³³⁵ These altered selves fragment the unity of the artistic subject, inducing scission, multiplicity, or at least instability in the

³³⁵ Rot, Warhol, and others obviously also disrupt authorship in a thousand other ways beyond the scope of this passage. Here I wish to point only to the literal printing of the name.

notion of the individual author that was thought to be secured under the identity of a single, consistent name.

Second, on a practical level, the name-substitution subverts a principal task of the author-function in art, namely to organize groups of objects into archival unities based on the names of their producers. Shortly after Roland Barthes' famous "Death of the Author," Michel Foucault delivered a response entitled "What is an Author?," a probing exploration of the functions of authorship in different discursive spaces. For Foucault, it is not enough "to repeat the empty slogan: the author has disappeared."³³⁶ Rather than dismiss authorship out of hand, it is necessary too see the author, and particularly his mythic name, as a complex discursive construct that functions differently under different historical and discursive conditions. Foucault takes aim at the specific function of the author's name as a taxonomic principle within artistic discourse, wherein the name marks off the edges of individual works [*oeuvres*] and groups them under a single sign of authorship. In other words, the name-of-the-author serves an archival function, which Manzoni's onomastic exchange works to subvert. All the mystical unities of artistic production (author, work, and *oeuvre*) proceed under the name of the artist, and all are simultaneously invoked here, only to be typographically displaced.

For this reason it is crucial that Manzoni replaces his own name not with a pseudonym, like Rose Sélavy, or an orthographic rearrangement, like Diter Rot, but instead with the proper name of another historically existent individual who was also involved in the book's production process. The specificity of this substitution has generated significant confusion, often with direct effects on the classification and

³³⁶ Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Countermemory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 121.

reception of the work. So successful has been this disruption of the archival function of the name-of-the-author, in fact, that the book teeters as the edge of Manzoni's official body of work. The global library database Worldcat, for instance, catalogs the book under Petersen's name, at the top of a list of books undoubtedly written indeed by the man Jes Petersen. In short, the name-substitution has been effective enough to jeopardize the book's status as an authentic work of art by the artist Piero Manzoni.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the name-substitution ties literary and aesthetic authorship to the relations of production. Jes Petersen is not just any old collaborator; he is the publisher of the book in question. Petersen owned not only the publishing house for *Life and Work*, which goes by his name, but eventually also the bookstore in Berlin where the second edition of the book would be sold. To place the name of the publisher of this volume in the typographical space reserved for the author is to draw our attention to the relationship of a writer or artist to the institutions of manufacture and distribution that make a book like this possible. This is Walter Benjamin's central point in "The Author as Producer," when he writes, "Rather than ask, what is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?" I should like to ask, 'What is its position within them?'"³³⁷ If for Benjamin this analytically materialist insight could serve as a call to arms in the class struggle, however, for Manzoni artistic labor no longer holds revolutionary power. He recognized that within existing social relations, and increasingly as advanced capital ramped up its totalitarian hegemony, the author would serve the existing structure whether she liked it or not.

³³⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 222.

After all, what is centrally at stake in the name-substitution and its taxonomic fallout is the issue of intellectual property. The name-substitution occasions a number of difficulties in terms not only of *attribution* but also of *ownership*. Who made this little book, and to whom does it belong? Who has the right to claim it as their own, as their own property, and thus to sell it? Turning again to Foucault, we find that he links the birth of modern authorship precisely to the birth of modern ownership, and explicitly to the nascent industry of publishing. The Author was born, he argues, “once a system of ownership for texts came into being, once strict rules concerning author’s rights, author-publisher relations, rights of reproduction, and related matters were enacted.”³³⁸ At the dawn of the industrial revolution, the name-of-the-author gained power not only as an epistemological or aesthetic category, but also as a legal one, marshaling the force of law to protect the privacy of literary property within the social relations of a political economy in which the productive apparatus—for books as for any other commodity—were privately held.

As their correspondence make clear, Manzoni’s relationship to Petersen, in the matter of the book at least, was a rather traditional one of author to publisher, and consequently *Life and Works* can be called a collaborative effort only in the sense that any published work necessarily involves the collectivity inherent in manufacturing

³³⁸ This passage also ties the advent of private intellectual property to the injunction that the author/artist become a transgressor. Not only can a writer now be held legally accountable for seditious texts, but he also must redeem himself aesthetically for the sin of ownership by transgressing the Law in every sense. Artistic transgression becomes an imperative at precisely the moment when aesthetic practice becomes more integrated and, paradoxically, more dangerous. Ownership, authorship, and transgression are thus a linked triad in the development of the modern Author. They also happen to be three central themes in Manzoni’s practice at large. See Foucault’s “What is an Author?” in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 141–160, where the cited quotation appears on p. 148. The quotation is slightly shortened in the Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon translation in *Language, Countermemory, Practice*, pp. 124–125.

processes. In substituting the publisher's name for the writer's, the book displaces the name of the author onto the name of the productive apparatus—or more precisely, *its owner*—responsible for the physical manufacture, promotion, and distribution of the book-form. Authors and publishers both claim rights in the property relations of books and their distribution, a system of power and economics proceeding under the banner of individual creation which Manzoni disturbs quite efficaciously with a calculated switch. Beyond shaking the unity of author and oeuvre, Manzoni's substitution welds authorship to the economic system that underwrites it, and moreover in a fashion that continues to disrupt the epistemological, legal, and practical categories at work within that system to this day.

The Book About Nothing

“If one is making something which is to be nothing, the one making it must love and be patient with the material he chooses. Otherwise, he calls attention to the material, which is precisely something, whereas it was nothing that was being made; or he calls attention to himself, whereas nothing is anonymous.”

-John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” 1950/60

“Man is nothing.”

-Carl Lazslo, 1959

“Qualche cose é quasi niente (nessuna cosa).”

-Manifesto Against Nothing for the Exhibition of Nothing, 1960

Nothing was in the air in those days. *Nothing* was in fashion. *Nothing* was on everyone's mind. At the turn of the sixties, *nothing*, it seemed, was everything. *Nothing*,

however, was also multiple and protean. For a term predicated on nonexistence and exclusion, *nothing* turned out to be a lot of rather specific *somethings*. In postwar Europe, for example, the neo-avantgarde succeeded in rediscovering various nothings of various kinds, a series of nothings that went by many names: Nothing, Zero, Nul, Niente, Nichts, le Rien, and le Vide, to name a few. Manzoni is well-known to have participated in the Zero Group, having published in issue three of their magazine and exhibited works with them several times. Along with Otto Piene, Heinz Mack, and Carl Lazslo (among others), Manzoni signed the statement, “The Manifesto Against Nothing for the International Exhibition of Nothing” in 1960. At about the same time, Lazslo’s magazine *Panderma* also featured several of Manzoni’s works (and an advertisement for his gallery Azimut) in an issue entitled “Man is Nothing.” The slogan, repeated all over the cover of the magazine, is also the title of Lazslo’s antihumanist screed printed in no fewer than five languages within *Panderma*’s pages.

It is probably John Cage who initiated the rage in postwar nothings with his famous “Lecture on Nothing,” delivered first in 1950, in which he compared nothing to “an empty glass into which anything may be poured.”³³⁹ For Cage, nothing was sometimes called “silence,” the withdrawal of sound or image that would reveal, in the form of a vacant vessel, the ambient plenitude of the world. By the time Cage delivered the lecture for the second time, ten years later, the word was becoming endlessly overdetermined, a signifier as empty (or overfull) as his proverbial glass. Indeed, in

³³⁹ John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 110; quoted in Julia Robinson, “Prime Media,” p. 19.

1960-61 Robert Morris would break with the cult of Cage in precisely these terms: “From the subjective point of view,” writes Morris, “there is no such thing as nothing.”³⁴⁰

Of course, radical reduction had long been a central project of modernism, and prewar avant-gardes had already discovered several nothings, several zeroes, several times. Such varied techniques as monochromy, deskilling, and flatness had all proceeded under a generalized banner of reduction, an epistemologically analytical expurgation whose historicist drive winnowed the work to its leanest possible state, the so-called “point-zero.” Before the war, modernist reductivism very often operated according to a logic of critical analysis, an enlightenment project of liquidating all extraneous aspects of an artwork to clarify some indispensable and defining structure, be it color, flatness, line, and so on. Despite its changes over time, *nothing* after the war remained as indispensable as before it. Like the points-zero that preceded them, postwar nothings were historically and discursively determined, and “nothing” meant a different “something” each time it appeared. If these postwar heirs to the legacy of nothing could be charged with amnesia, we might remember that discourse, founded always on the basis of exclusions, can often summon the very thing it tries to forget. After the war, the rediscoveries of multiple points-zero, of various nothings, were themselves haunted by their own anamneses. It has therefore been said that in aesthetic practice, postwar nothings frequently counted both historical and discursive memory among their constitutive exclusions.³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Robert Morris, “Blank Form,” reproduced in *±1961*, p. 211. The text was originally intended to be included in La Monte Young’s *Anthology* alongside another text “MD-Rx,” in which Morris decries “the followers of John Cage,” but both texts were pulled by their author before the publication finally went to print in 1963. See *ibid.*, p. 210.

³⁴¹ Cf. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Plenty or Nothing: From Yves Klein’s *Le Vide* to Arman’s *Le Plein*,” in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, pp. 257-283.

It is possible to see these neo-avantgarde nothings as a response to the catastrophe of WWII. It is not difficult to sympathize with the attempt to start over, to clear the slate, to begin again from zero. Barnett Newman wanted to return to the first man, for example, and the Zero group hoped technology might restore some originary connection with nature. The problem is that it is precisely these kind of anti-mnemonic cultural fictions that prevent the recognition of the failures of the prewar nothings, that cause lapses in discursive and historical memory, and that open the door to new threats. The postwar period saw the triumph of a capitalist consumer culture that thrived precisely on the continual production of forgetting, the daily manufacture of an eternal present, kept alive by an industrialized cultural apparatus that could absorb the greatest critical shocks, turning even the most advanced forms of aesthetic resistance and critical negation into their uncanny and affirmative opposites, obliterating history and the possibility of its mnemonic recuperation.

If *Life and Works*' insistent emptiness partakes of this tradition of nothingness, therefore, it will be necessary to specify the contours of the nothing it produces, to isolate its conceptual and historical parameters. Devised in the wake of the "Manifesto Against Nothing for the International Exhibition of Nothing," a manifesto cosigned by Manzoni, nothing will necessarily be implicated in its own undoing: the negation of a negation.³⁴² But arising as it does within the form of the book, Manzoni's nothing must also confront

³⁴² The "Manifesto Against Nothing" carries deliberate echoes of Cagean silence. "Music," it reads in part, "is almost as pleasing as no sound. Noise is almost as pleasing as no noise." The signatories are Carl Laszlo, Onorio, Rolf Fenkart, Bazon Brock, Herbert Schuldt, Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani, Heinz Mack, and Otto Piene. The 1961 version of this Exhibition of Nothing in Amsterdam (the Dutch-language manifesto for which Manzoni also signed) involved the participation of Karlheinz Stockhausen, who had published Cage's works in 1959. For an extensive review of the facts concerning this "anti-exhibition," see Marcone, *Piero Manzoni: Scritti sull'arte*, pp. 40-41 and pp. 105-106.

nothing's linguistic dimensions. Indeed, it was right around this time that "nothingness" would begin to take on a rather difference valence, one less concerned with Cagelan plenitude (or even generalized reductivism) and more invested in linguistic signs. It is in the rendezvous between the discursive spaces of art and the relations of its production that Manzoni's book formulates its own image of nothingness.

In 1963, the very year that Manzoni's blank biography first revealed its internal absence, a theorist in France pondered "the essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear and be produced within language." The theorist is Derrida, and in this case "nothing" is "essential" because language, as Saussure argued, has no positive terms, but is rather a field of pure difference. For signs as for discourse, exclusions are constitutive.

In the same essay, Derrida goes on to write of this condition within the category of the book. He writes, "The pure book, the book itself, by virtue of what is most indispensable within it, must be the 'book about nothing' that Flaubert dreamed of—a gray, negative dream, the origin of the total Book that haunted other imaginations." Although his verbiage is poetically evasive, what Derrida means by this "Book" can be described on at least two levels. First, in constituting itself solely by means of its exclusions, each sign summons the specter of all that it is not, the totality of other signs on which meaning—as fully relational—fully depends. Second, the pure Book is also the mythic hope that words might communicate a totality, that signs might somehow organize themselves so as to be commensurate with experience, that language—predicated on absences—might conjure up presence. Derrida has in mind two memories from the early days of modernism: first, Mallarmé's dream of the pure book, which, as Blanchot explains, can only be realized in oneiric negative. "This book of which one

must dream,” writes Blanchot, “which is the Book, equivalent of the world, orphic explanation of the Earth, is not so much the Great Work...as the hollow of this totality, its other side, its realized absence...withdrawn from everything and expressed by nothing.”³⁴³ Derrida’s other intertext is the letter that Flaubert wrote to his mistress in 1852, in which he spoke of his desire to write “a book about nothing...a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible.”³⁴⁴

This spectral book does indeed return to haunt other imaginations, Manzoni’s included, an uncanny apparition from the modernist unconscious. Although equally negative, Manzoni’s dream of the “book about nothing” is blanched, by age perhaps or by successive returns, from Derrida’s shade of gray first to a ghostly white (true to the exigencies of postmodern commodities, its promotional postcard proliferated in numbers far greater than the book itself). By the time the first transparent volume appeared in 1963, the last vestiges of opacity had drained from the page to reside in the spine. Exsanguinated, the pages of the book hover at the border of visibility, each pellucid page threatening to fade away completely. Six years later, the book makes another uncanny return, and this time even the spine is see-through, since the second edition is bound entirely in clear plastic. In each new dream, it seems, there is less and less to see.

Since Mallarmé, the absence and nothing at the heart of language have been signified by its spacings. In Manzoni’s book, spacing takes on a radical character, expanding to purge all language, all symbolic marks, from the interior of the book. The

³⁴³ Blanchot, “The Myth of Mallarmé,” p. 36.

³⁴⁴ Gustave Flaubert, *Lettres à sa maitresse, Tome I*, ed. Sylvain Kerandoux (Rennes: La Part Commune, 2008), p. 461.

constitutive contingency of signs, their relational dependency on the networks of signification from which they are drawn and which each diacritically excludes, here becomes an *aesthetic* contingency resulting from the material properties of the book itself: in refracting and reflecting light, we can see in its surfaces its own contextual dependency. It is quite literally transparent to all that is outside itself. Here presence—in the notably uninspiring form of incidental indexes—invaginates spacing.³⁴⁵

But if the ideated complexities of language and its structures in the sixties occasionally invited enthusiasm for a new kind of transhistorical infinite, a certain awe before the abyssal barathrum of the signifying chain, then it is all the more significant that Manzoni links the nothing at the heart of this particular discursive space to its most material (and, by extension, historical) conditions.³⁴⁶ By purging all linguistic signs from the interior of the book—its radical reduction—Manzoni makes the discursive object into an aesthetic one; the substrate of language congeals into plastic form. The specificity of its material composition flouts Cage’s warning (especially since it bears Manzoni’s name while simultaneously evacuating selfhood on several levels), and dramatically enacts Mallarmé’s materialist paradox first identified by Blanchot.

Language is not purged entirely, of course, and so what little text remains takes on heightened importance. Its title cites a humanist literary tradition in which language still believed it could indeed communicate a totality: the wholeness of an individual subject—

³⁴⁵ This is an inversion of Rosalind Krauss’ phrase “spacing ‘invaginates’ presence,” a gloss on Derrida. See “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, p. 106.

³⁴⁶ Later on, of course, post-structuralist theory and Derrida himself would undergo what has been called the “ethical turn,” restoring historical specificity and political radicality to deconstructed language, thereby furnishing post-Marxist thought with critical criteria that are indispensable today, as in the important work of Judith Butler.

the totality of their life and the memory of their work. In place of language, we find blank pages, and in place of memory, we find an eternal present in the form of indexically or optically receptive surfaces, themselves the synthetic products of modern technology. The publisher/author substitution links the monographic literary tradition to the relations of production at work within it, which conspired to invent the proprietary individual only to dissolve him ever more completely into collective abstractions. The singular, authoritative authorial Self that might emerge from other monographs finds itself called to account only to vanish entirely in the very instruments of its own articulation.

Nearly all of this text—the author’s name, the title and subtitle—are misdirections, fraudulent elocutions; their referents appear only in the form of their absence or by means of some strange substitute. On this cover, even the proper name cannot be trusted. It is only the banal textual data at the bottom, transmitting information about the book’s time and place of manufacture, that carries the force of fact, the instrumental transparency of word to referent.

Apropos of *nothing*, the book must also be seen within the context of Manzoni’s other works that thrive on the tactics of enclosure and aesthetic withdrawal. Like the Lines, the Shit, and the *Pacchi*, the Book tempts us to open it with the threat that there might be something scandalous inside, or even—more scandalous, still—*nothing at all* in there. Manzoni continually emphasized the necessity of leaving closed the tubes that contained his lines, but the admonition was humorously emphasized with the group of tubes that claimed to contain an *Infinite Line* (1960). “Recently I have executed a line of infinite length,” he said, “but this one also has its defect. It is necessary to keep the tube that contains its perfectly closed, because if you open it, the line will disappear.” Unlike

the tubes, the book is meant to be opened, but only to enact the same “defect” that plagued the Infinite Line. Once you open it, its putative contents—words, images, Piero Manzoni, his life, his work—all vanish, leaving only its container, the empty husk of a work.

Another work performs similar operations of reflectivity and concealment, the *Linea Lunga 1000 Metri* of July 1961. While shorter lines are preserved in black tubes (and a larger one in an enormous lead drum), this line is enclosed in a brilliant silvery cylinder. Its curved sides bend the light of the room in a distorted 360-degree panorama, such that the viewer and the exhibition space become indexical smears across its gleaming surface. Its flat disc of a top provides a more conventional mirror, reflecting light and images from above not unlike the book in its closed, horizontal position. Ambient light bends and bounces off this heavy container, and yet its contents remain as invisible as ever. Even as its cylindrical casement offers back to its exhibition space a variety of flashing images that move and change as one rounds the piece, the line itself stays sheltered within, invisible and inaccessible as always.



Figure 70. Manzoni and the Linea 1000 Meters (1961) in 1962

If in Manzoni's work we can observe a dialectic of anti-aesthetic negation and spectacularized engagement, in the book the poles of this binary collapse into one another. The book is an empty container that refuses to disclose its contents, and yet it is also perfectly open and transparent, a synthetic commodity that submits with a wink to the optical vicissitudes of its contemporary moment. It is an aesthetic object that summons the tropes of clarity and immateriality only to refract them through the base materiality of the industrial support. It engages a humanist discourse of authorship and biography only to refuse it—offering blanks where a bio should be, typesetting the name-of-the-publisher in the place of the author, and displacing the conditions of creativity and selfhood onto the relations of production. In this way, the book evacuates the pre-Duchampian/pre-Barthesian Author without simply declaring its death (or the complementary birth of some equally valorized Reader), instead articulating the position

of aesthetic and discursive producers under conditions of advanced capitalist consumer culture. The subtitle *Life and Works*, not incidentally printed in English, reflects the growing dominance of that tongue within commodity consumerism, which in 1963 (especially in Italy) was certainly linked with an imperialist American culture.

It accomplishes all of this with an extreme parsimony of means, exposing both the rationalist techniques of modernist reductivism (not to mention faith in technological progress) *and* the humanist romanticism that all too frequently attended it (from Mallarmé to Malevich to Mondrian to Klein) to the conditions of failure, fetishization, and instrumentality that had become their fate. Using all the modernist techniques of ascetic withdrawal and critical resistance, it retreats into the radical reduction of missing language and blank spaces, and yet rather than declare freedom thereby, it turns (like all Manzoni's works) into a thing.

The Death of This Author

The emptiness of the plastic volume, while obviously a citation of spacings and erasures that had come before, also does some work of mourning. A plastic commodity, it mourns the loss of auratic aesthetic objects, their putative freedom from social regulation. It mourns the loss of spacing and erasure themselves as critical practices, submitting them entirely to the contingencies of time and place within a material container that bears the name of its manufacturer in the place of its creator, a stack of panes that mirrors back with perfect fidelity the world that produces and consumes it, anchored typographically to the social relations of its moment of production.

Most of all, it mourns the loss of its title, Piero Manzoni: Life and Work. What else could it mean that this artist conceives his own monograph, the storied unity of man-and-his-work, as a blank volume? Manzoni's book about nothing is a book about himself, artistic subjectivity become a Nothing, an empty signifier that cedes its signifieds to chance and history. The privileged subject for which the artist had traditionally stood, as both figure and incarnation, has here been dissolved into vacant discursive space, impossible to articulate. The book claims to contain the totality of this man and his work, leveraging the name as an archival instrument of fetishization, even as his actual position as author is displaced by another who is simultaneously publisher and vendor. Manzoni as author and as artist quite literally vanishes into this anti-text, an optically contingent material object whose only linguistic inscriptions are its (falsified) framing data. Become a shiny synthetic serial thing, the form of the monograph is perverted into the eradication of the self and of its memory, unable to speak and impossible to read, whose only words are mostly lies, and whose text is an empty vessel, an object without a subject.

The fact that all of this took place at the very moment of Manzoni's actual bodily demise is too grim a coincidence to ignore. 1963 is the year of Manzoni's death, and so indeed, the subject of the book ceased to appear at the very moment the book first appeared, in gruesome fulfillment of Flaubert's absent subject, of Barthes dead author, and after that subject's own process of fading away. Manzoni would likely laugh at this morbid literalization: that his life and work ceased at the moment that his *Life and Work* appeared. It is unlikely, in fact, that he ever saw this invisible book. His eyes never

peered through the clear blank pages that refuse to tell the story of the man and his work,
as if such things were possible anymore anyway.

Coda. Ten Notes on the *Pacchi*

How on earth did anyone get the idea that people can communicate by letter! Of a distant person one can think, and of a person near one can catch hold—all else goes beyond human strength. Writing letters, however, means to denude oneself before the ghosts, something for which they greedily wait. Written kisses don't reach their destination, rather they are drunk along the way by the ghosts. It is on this ample nourishment that they multiply so enormously. Humanity sees this and fights against it and in order to eliminate as far as possible the ghostly element between people and to create a natural communication, the peace of souls, it has invented the railway, the motor car, the aeroplane. But it's no longer any good, these are evidently inventions being made at the moment of crashing. The opposite side is so much stronger; after the postal service it has invented the telegraph, the telephone, the radiograph. The ghosts won't starve, but we will perish.

*Kafka to Milena*³⁴⁷

- I. In the last year of his life, Manzoni began to make a series of Achromes that go by the name of *Pacchi* (*Packages*).³⁴⁸ Each of these works features an unseen object wrapped in paper—precisely like a parcel prepared to be sent by mail—suspended at the center of an unmarked canvas and surrounded by a simple white frame. Paper packages tied up with string, the *Pacchi* also feature vermillion-red spots of sealing wax, and the ends of their string are secured with lead seals, two historical techniques of closure for Italian parcels. The twine or string binds the package together—subtly cinching it in, pinching its form and slightly wrinkling its surface—and also binds the object directly to the canvas. Threaded through four holes in the fabric, the twine is

³⁴⁷ The epigraph is taken from a famous passage in Kafka's letters to Milena Jesenská, his epistolary mistress who later died in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, ed. Willy Haas, trans. Tania and James Stern (New York: Schocken Books, 1953), 229. For the historical details of Milena's fate, see Willy Haas' "Preface" in the same volume, 7-13.

³⁴⁸ All of the *Pacchi* Achromes can be dated to 1962.

crisscrossed over a wooden truss on the back of the frame, specially scored to keep the twine in place, thus securing the package tightly to its support. We view the packages and their canvas backgrounds through a pane of glass (Fig. 70).

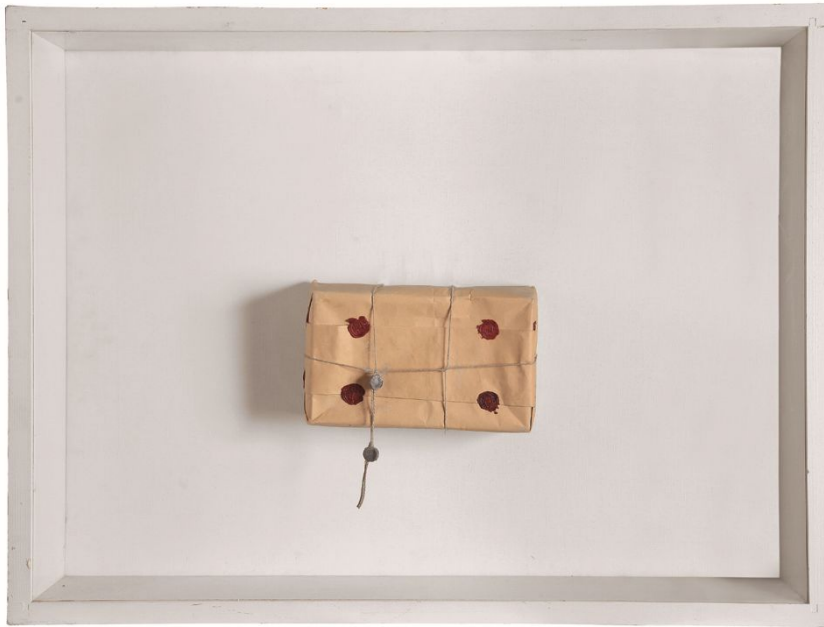


Figure 71. Piero Manzoni. *Achrome (Pacco)*. 1962

- II. The most obvious precedent for these works are Christo's wrapped objects, which Manzoni may have seen shortly before making his first *Pacco*.³⁴⁹ Any wrapped art-object inevitably calls Christo to mind, an artist for whom the practice of enclosing things in fabric has become a longstanding visual trademark. One of Christo's works from 1960, also entitled *Package*, bears a startling resemblance to Manzoni's: an object wrapped in white, tied with

³⁴⁹ Interview with Agostino Bonalumi in Mauro Maffezzoni, "Indagine su Piero Manzoni" (unpublished manuscript at the Archivio Piero Manzoni, 1986), 64. Bonalumi contends that they saw Christo's gallery show at the Galleria Apollinaire together, and that Manzoni produced his first packages, immediately framed, a few days later. Since this show did not take place until 1963, it is more likely that Manzoni became aware of Christo's works earlier, through Guido Le Noci in Milan around January, 1962; see Battino and Palazzoli, p. 147.

twine, and mounted into a frame against green velvet.³⁵⁰ The comparison also reveals some telling differences, however. Christo's early objects are tied helter-skelter, often with tangled redundancies and bunchings, the linear strings intersecting at dramatically oblique angles. Unlike Christo's formally complex and romantically evocative arrangements, Manzoni's string binding follows the perpendicular intersections of the grid. Whereas Manzoni's Pacchi are invariably wrapped rather modestly in paper of some kind, Christo wrapped his package in silk, and therefore the material stretches and bulges over the contours of the obscured object. Although both artists' packages elicit the desire to see inside, Manzoni's do so in the banal visual language of an everyday postal package, even given the addition of *cera lacca*, whose polka-dots also fall into a gridded pattern. Christo's objects, by contrast, with their tumescences and protruding shapes, provide tantalizing clues (and misdirections) as to what strange object might lurk beneath the wrapping. Their uncanny morphologies fall rather neatly into a long tradition of surrealist practices, directly recalling Man Ray's photograph *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse* (1920), named for the famous dictum of Lautreamont about the shocking encounter of incongruous objects. Manzoni was at pains to distance himself from any surrealist lineage, as he insisted in his correspondence.³⁵¹

³⁵⁰ See Matthias Koddenberg, *Christo and Jean-Claude: Early Works 1958-64* (Bönen: Kettler Verlag, 2009), 81.

³⁵¹ As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, Manzoni refused the legacies of both surrealism and constructivism, writing, "*je ne voudrais pas tomber dans les histoires post-*

- III. Incidentally, the surrealist connection also helps (ahem) *unpack* the differences between Manzoni's signed women of January 1961 and Christo's *Wrapped Woman* of the same month. Apart from the differences of verticality versus horizontality and the attendant connotations, Christo's woman, whose body is swathed in plastic like a corpse in a body-bag, can be none other than that surrealist cadaver-woman, whose weird, convulsive beauty-in-death marked the charged intersection of desire and terror that so fascinated Breton and company. Manzoni's classicist travesties could not be further from a post-surrealist project, especially since the distribution-form of the newsreel situated the *Sculture viventi* in conditions of exposure and broadcast, the spectacularization of visual *disclosure*, particularly of women's bodies, through which desire was commodified and regulated during the postwar period—an administered visuality that stands as the dialectical opposite to the aesthetic withdrawals present in both Christo and Manzoni's other work.
- IV. The Pacchi could also be viewed as distant cousins of the “mail art” trend underway at the time. From New York, Ray Johnson had already been mailing works of art for a few years, usually prints or collages, occasionally with instructions to the recipient to send the work off to another party, thus

surrealiste, ou bien constructivistes.” Unpublished correspondence, Archivio Piero Manzoni in Milan.

initiating a chain of correspondence.³⁵² Edward M. Plunkett took up the game, founding the New York Correspondence School in the mid-sixties.³⁵³ La Monte Young's monumental *Anthology of Chance Operations* from 1963 documents a number of works sent by mail, including facsimiles of their postmarked envelopes, which could be opened to reveal folded reproductions of the works on paper inside. Despite their populist naïveté, postal art did effect a renovation of distribution-form, an oppositional avant-garde practice dating back at least to John Heartfield, who made the book jacket and the magazine cover into mechanically-reproduced artworks distributed to a mass audience.³⁵⁴ Despite the somewhat private character of mail-art's missives, practitioners like Johnson and Plunkett did succeed in inserting works of art into a public distribution system still monopolized by the State at the time, a postal system which was frequently leveraged to delegitimize works of art and literature that traveled its circuits.³⁵⁵

The Pacchi make reference to these organized systems of public distribution, but decline ostentatiously to enter them. Though fashioned in the image of a

³⁵² Edward M. Plunkett, "The New York Correspondence School," *Art Journal* XXXVI (Spring 1977): 233-241.

³⁵³ Ray Johnson also took on this moniker, deliberately misspelling it "Correspondance" in an inadvertent echo of Derrida. Johnson disavowed the term and the practice in the early seventies. See *ibid.*, p. 234.

³⁵⁴ I do not intend here in any way to equate Fluxus's politically timid mailing experiments to John Heartfield's revolutionary antifascist practice, but rather merely to point out the structural similarity in their shared focus on the apparatus of distribution for works of art.

³⁵⁵ I have in mind here the sometimes-successful attempts by the US Postal Service to ban works by James Joyce and Jean Genet (among many others) by sending them in the mail, thus exposing them to legal censorship as obscene.

postal package, the three-dimensional constructions at the center of each of these works is quite literally tied down in place. Like dead butterflies, these parcels have been pinned to a white background, preserved behind glass, immobile. Whatever hope of sending and receiving they may summon is immediately negated by their frames, which, unlike *Anthology's* envelopes, can never be opened.

- V. Instead, we are permitted to see only the wrapping, the exterior. Unlike with the later practice for which Christo has become so well-known, we do not know what is inside the Pacco, and we are not invited to participate in the merry process of its enclosure. All process is aborted. We arrive too late; enclosure is a *fait accompli*. The package, of course, never arrives, but only hangs suspended in mid-air, its little tail of twine hanging pendulously, like a stopped grandfather clock.



Figure 72. Piero Manzoni. *Pacco* (detail of wax seal). 1962

- VI. Apropos of clocks and grandfathers, time and ancestral relations matter here. Although the lead seals are typical of postal packages sent in Italy around 1960, particularly for parcels of high value, the wax seals are obviously not.

An elaborate monogram in vermillion sealing wax constitutes a deliberate and flamboyant anachronism (Fig. 71). This brilliant splotch refers us to a pastness in several senses:

- a. First, it is a technique of enclosure that is no longer in use. It is an obsolete technical practice.
- b. Second, the monogram itself and the tool used for impressing it are both bequests from previous generations. Manzoni inherited them both. He is heir, that is, to both the name and the seal. It is highly unlikely that Manzoni produced the monogram-stamp himself, and family members speculate that it was originally used (even then perhaps anachronistically) by Manzoni's paternal grandfather Pietro Manzoni, or more likely his maternal grandfather Piero Meroni.³⁵⁶ The artist, after all, was named after both.
- c. Third, the technique and its monograms are associated with social classes—aristocracy and the bourgeoisie—that have been irreparably altered by modern changes in the means of production and the modes of consumption. Manzoni's name is itself a reminder of an aristocratic pedigree, since the young Piero was already in fact a peer, the eldest male child of a deceased count. The seal is the foiled emblem of patrilineage and primogeniture; it is a false sign for a name not carried, a bequeathed seal for a name not inherited. And yet inherited still, since Piero M. shelters Meroni within, just as P. Manzoni shelters Pietro.

³⁵⁶ Author's conversation with Manzoni's sister Elena Manzoni di Chiosca, March 2013.

- d. This is all speculative, however. The inscrutable seal, whose arabesque windings defy legibility, leads us back along a lineage, but it is a line that is hard to follow. Its origins unknown, the monogram may not even be the inherited emblem of generations past. It may not even say PM, for that matter. The letters might read BM instead. Who can say, when the stamp is gone and its mark impossible to read? Regardless, we should *think* PM here, even if we cannot read it, since Manzoni's name is impressed crisply on the grey discs of lead, partners to the wax seals in red. The indexed name is unclear even if the intended identity is not, the winding letters of the seal twisting into a lost history.



Figure 73. Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts. *Quodlibet*. 1675

- e. Fourth, envelopes and sealing wax were common tropes of *trompe-l'oeil* painting, as in the pinboard composition *Quodlibet* (1675) by Cornelius

Norbertus Gijsbrechts (Fig. 72) or *Trompe-l'oeil con stampe* (1690) by Filippo Abbiati. In the past, illusionism deceived and thus delighted the eye. With Manzoni, however, the frame delivers the three-dimensional object teased-at in the two-dimensional *trompe*, and thereby cancels the pleasure of the trick. We yearn for our deception of yore, withheld in the mute facticity of the bundle. But even as they offer the object of representation, the Pacchi deny us visual access to its contents. From an eye deceived to an eye denied, the packages continue the anti-formalist harangue that Manzoni initiated in his manifesto “Free Dimension” and the anti-aesthetic impulse that drives the dialectic of his practice.

- f. Fifth, the seals conjure pastness through indexicality. The deep red imprints are circles of a sort, but their contours become bulbous and irregular as the hot wax squishes out around the stamp. All stamps are indexes, of course, but these fluid spots also indicate the material properties of the substrate itself, which solidifies in the process of cooling.³⁵⁷ Wax cools very quickly, and therefore its solid form retains the capricious morphology of a liquid. The temporal process of cooling is arrested before our eyes, a liquid visible in solid form. The before remains in the after.

³⁵⁷ Jasper Johns, a frequent reference-point for Manzoni, had also exploited the restrictions of wax-based pigments to limit the expressive potential of his facture.

g. Sixth, the red is dripped and plopped sometimes messily over the package, a reminder of drips past,³⁵⁸ but desubjectivized here; their indexicality reveals no residue of psychic force or cognitive intention—even, ironically enough, as they bear the mark of the name. They strongly recall the roundish spots of color that punctuate the canvases of *Movimento Nucleare*, the group of painterly informel artists from which Manzoni had made a definitive break in 1958. The Nuclearists described their famous *macchia*: “a spot of anonymous and unexpected color demands the dignity of a name, a purpose, a meaning; demands that its free and violent purpose be legitimized”³⁵⁹ (Fig. 73). Manzoni’s wax winks back at this discursive memory only to annihilate its aspirations. If the Nuclear spots ranged irrationally through psychically charged fields of color, the wax *macchie* are harnessed to the order of the grid. Red spots organized against a white ground, their arrangement recalls the mechanical patterning of both polka and ben-ray dots, linking these works to Pop contemporaries like Kusama and Lichtenstein, but without a even a hint of spectacular affirmation. Impressed as they are into the service of a baroque anachronism, the seals consign their Nuclear ancestors, like all dead relatives, to a bygone era forever haunting the present.

³⁵⁸ For “drips past,” I am referring to Jackson Pollock, Abstract Expressionism, and Informel painting at large.

³⁵⁹ “Manifesto di Albisola Marina,” Aug 1-15, 1957 in Celant 1998, p. 310.



Figure 74. Piero Manzoni. Untitled. 1957

h. In sum, these seals and their temporalities are a sign of a florid and increasingly distant cultural heritage. An emblem of all that is past (the family, the name, the fluid, the mark, the sign, the self), it flaunts the absurdity of its continued persistence in the present.

VII. The wax imprints find more sober complements in the lead seals, a technique still current in the sixties for enclosing packages in the post (Fig. 74). Melted down and compressed at two sites near the dangling terminals of the binding string, the metal material registers signs in relief: on one side a raised triangle, on the other the name Piero Manzoni. Indexical stamps bearing both an icon of geometry and a symbol of self, the weight of the lead pulls on the dangling string, thus indicating the orientation of the object in space. These same double-leaded strings also fastened the *Fiato d'artista* pieces to their square

wooden bases. Linking shackled packets to tethered balloons, the bindings and their paired metal weights—bearing the mechanically-reproduced name-of-the-author—hang like little millstones round the necks of these otherwise-mobile objects.



Figure 75. Piero Manzoni. *Achrome (Pacco)* (detail). 1962

VIII. *Piombato* and *sigillato* are both Italian words for enclosure, derived from these two techniques, lead and wax respectively. Manzoni also used the word “sigillati” to describe the tubes of his *Linee*.³⁶⁰ Like the Pacchi, the Lines are secure in their tubes, since both are closed by means of an enclosure that would visually disclose the violation of its closure. At stake is the idea of occlusion, of something hidden, a seal unbroken and not-to-be-broken, a

³⁶⁰ Wladimiro Greco, “8 domande al pittore Manzoni,” *Il Travaso*, no. 39 (October 5, 1959), Milan.

secret kept, a thing untold. Trussed like a postal parcel, the package is primed for the sending, and yet its movement is arrested mid-voyage. The package is prepared but never arrives, delivered over instead to the eternal weigh-station of the frame and the museum wall. Like all Manzoni's lines, this line of transport has no ending, and possibly no content to begin with. We never get to see what's inside, and the doubly redundant multiplicity of seals signifies our unbroken suspense. The package's eternal enclosure denies us closure.

The message that can never be delivered, the secret that cannot be told, the packet is a pact kept, its virgin seals untampered with. These forms are of unknown content. Contents unknown, these are suspicious packages. "What is inside?" is a constant refrain in Manzoni spectatorship, and as with the Shit and the Lines, the answer is invariably withheld. The manchild takes us on a game of hide-and-seek in which the seeker is forever denied her quarry. In Manzoni's unending games, we are always and eternally "it."

- IX. The packages are designed to send something, and yet their journey is arrested by the stasis of the frame to which they are literally bound, which locks their contents into permanent visual obscurity. Like any postal package, the Pacchi are a form of material communication: a gift, a message, a symbol—in linguistic or aesthetic signifiers—packed for transport over long distance. The material methods of communication bring themselves into visibility, however, only to display a breakdown in communication, precisely by withholding the

visibility of their contents. They negate the capacity of works of art to perform communicative action across time and distance, across barriers of difference, between object and viewer (or author and viewer). In spectral form, they conjure the same kind of communicatory hope that one might find in factographic or otherwise engaged artistic practices. And yet this communication, or even simply its possibility, are summarily canceled through the very conventions which qualify this as a work of art in the first place, many of which, derived from easel painting, perform a travesty of the anachronistic and regressive tendencies that remain dialectically entrenched in even the most advanced artistic practice. Their invocations of various pasts—historical, material, personal, artistic—all deliberately thwart our access to them. A breakdown in communication enacts the disruption of memory, melancholically signifying the failure of works of art to initiate mnemonic processes.

- X. How on earth did anyone get the idea that people could communicate by works of art! Entwined to easel painting, these stopped packages (packed stoppages?) enact the double-bind of the artwork under the conditions of spectacle and culture industry: to communicate and thus to succumb to the pressure of assimilation and spectacularization, or to retreat into the critical negation that disavows all commitments to the social world. A third term, the reactionary pull of old traditions, locks these works in frames of inertia. Arrested mid-journey, these packages halt time, Janus-faced, looking back

upon the wreckage of history and forward toward a darkening future. Though we cannot see the aesthetic message enclosed, its wrapping hints at its promises: something about a past, about a self, about a freedom, something illegible and lost—drunk greedily by the ghosts, perhaps—entombed forever within the very apparatus that once made its promises possible to hope for.

Conclusion: Spectacular Futures

“The das put a moustache on la Gioconda, and at the first hesitant exhibition of abstract sculpture they submitted a representation of toilets. At the show of much-feared abstract art in 1913 [sic] in New York, the dada group sent the porcelain parts of a urinal. Bidets and chamber-pots have been acquired, and even today are conserved, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Amsterdam and the Galleria dell’Arte Informale in Liegi. I have a rare piece; would you like to buy it?”

-Piero Manzoni, October 1959³⁶¹

“You should know that sooner or later artists fall into the trap [cadono nella spirale] of a salesman. Within a few years, I too will be commercialized.”

-Piero Manzoni, December 1962³⁶²

After the trauma of the war, there had been over a decade of attempts in some cultural centers and among certain practitioners to recapture some of the promises that avant-garde art had once held. The reflexive faith in the beneficence of those spheres of activity thought to be quintessentially human—like science and art, for example—had been irrevocably shaken, along with a range of transhistorical constants—like nature and humanity—on which they had been based. Meanwhile, those regions of the self that had previously seemed so remote, and whose revolutionary power once seemed self-evident—like the body and the unconscious—suddenly revealed themselves to be wholly colonized by an industrialized cultural apparatus whose sophistication summarily outstripped the comparatively paltry effects of avant-garde activities, which nonetheless may have inadvertently supplied key tactics to that apparatus.

³⁶¹ Wladimiro Greco, “8 domande al pittore Manzoni,” *Il Travaso*, no. 39 (October 5, 1959), Milan.

³⁶² Franco Serra, “Costa duecento lire al litro: il fiato del pittore che non usa pennelli,” *Settimana Incom Illustrata* (16 December, 1962), p. 51.

The postwar fate of many prewar vanguardists began to delegitimize any continued claims for revolutionary potential. Parisians viewed the returning Surrealists as quaint anachronisms, so irrelevant as to be unworthy even of opposing. Descendants of the Bauhaus and Constructivism, those great prewar utopian design movements, went to work for corporations, designing expensive chairs and sleek plastic shells for consumer gadgets. Even when it was possible still to believe—to stave off cynicism just one more time—the results could not have been clearer: Pollock’s mythology of freedom delivered him right into the waiting hands of the CIA and Vogue magazine.

Having come of age in postwar Milan, Manzoni was uniquely positioned to observe the fickleness of advanced cultural practices. What set Milan apart in this connection were two related historical factors: first, the Futurist distinction of having been the sole prewar avant-garde formation to dedicate itself to full-throated support of fascism, and second, the rapidity and enthusiasm with which postwar Italian neo-avantgardes participated in the industries of fashion, advertising, and consumer design. The latter factor is perhaps attributable to Italy’s belated entry into advanced industry, such that, particularly after decades of fascism and within the persistent grip of the Catholic Church, the American model of capitalist social relations could have looked to many like real freedom (perhaps understandably so).

After all, the history of the twentieth-century avant-garde had opened with Futurism and the masculinist cult of the war machine. Futurism’s thirst for metallic violence was so enduring that even WWI was not able to satisfy it, since the movement’s central participants went on to cheer the military adventures of Benito Mussolini.³⁶³ The

³⁶³ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s zeal for fascism is of course well-documented, and Futurism paved the way for the very same values that sustained the fascist state. Although Mussolini

very same artists who a few decades before had been central if sometimes naïve actors in a post-Cubist dismantling of artistic traditions, proved equally willing to abandon avant-garde positions in a Return to Order which, in the Italian case, worked in direct service to the fascist regime (see: Carlo Carrà)—all this, even as the Futurist vanguard continued to bang at the door of official recognition.

After WWII, a nascent Italian neo-avantgarde proclaims the liberatory promise of television while simultaneously promulgating a design culture that continues even today to organize everyday aesthetic experience and instrumentalize affect in the service of commercial capital. Just as Carrà transitions seamlessly from oppositional vanguardist to arch-conservative fascist, so too does Fontana—after stints in Argentina—toss off the blackshirt (and its aesthetic demands) to assume the dubious role of avuncular mentor to the neo-avantgarde. In the thirties, his participation in the Milan Triennale had consisted of monumental sculpture celebrating the fascist nation-state, but it picks up again right after the war with modish arabesques in glowing neon. Ettore Sottsass, having been a Nuclearist in the fifties, pivoted to become one of Italy's best-known postwar designers.

eventually fell back on neoclassical populism as the official style of fascism, it is crucial to remember that a modernist aesthetic also continued to flourish throughout the period. Both Mussolini and Hitler made use of the most advanced aesthetic techniques when it suited their interests, particularly in the fields of photography and film. Riefenstahl is of course the indispensable German example, and in Italy the “Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution” in 1932 employed both modernist geometricity and avant-garde photomontage to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Mussolini's march on Rome. Cf. Benjamin Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” and “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression.” The facts of Futurism's political and ideological orientation were clear enough, despite the decorous whitewashing, at the recent exhibition at the Guggenheim.

In the sixties, the kineticist Gruppo T was led by the latterday-futurist-turned-industrial-designer Bruno Munari.³⁶⁴

The frenetic activity of affirmative cultural practitioners in postwar Italy, which decades ago may have looked inexplicably like the erosion of any and all aesthetic categories—let alone spaces of resistance—appears today as the sign of an astonishingly prescient cultural dispositif, beside which the formalist American obsession with *easel painting* (of all things) suddenly looks totally parochial and archaic. In response to these conditions, it is not surprising that Italy would also go on to produce the very same Leftist formations—namely Autonomist Marxists—who hold such critical relevance for the biopolitical-neoliberal realities of the twenty-first century. It is instructive to remember, however, that Manzoni's untimely death occurred just before these specific Left tendencies took hold in certain sectors of the Italian neo-avantgarde.³⁶⁵

Thus Manzoni (in the epigraph above), after explaining to a journalist through mostly false information his affiliation with the transgressive anti-aesthetic of Duchamp and Dada, suddenly breaks away to perform his awareness of the historical failure of the anti-aesthetic to combat the commercial and cultural fetishization of the art object (not to mention the concomitant fetishization of their rebellious producers) by offering his astonished interviewer the sale of a “rare piece.” Later, just before his death, after attempting to explain to another journalist the significance of *Artist's Shit*, his face

³⁶⁴ As I write these words, the *Colosseo Quadrato* in Rome, the centerpiece of Mussolini's aesthetic vision, is being prepared to house the headquarters of the fashion design company Fendi.

³⁶⁵ Cf. Jacopo Galimberti, “The N Group and the Operaisti: Art and Class Struggle in the Italian Economic Boom,” *Grey Room* 49 (Fall 2012), pp. 80-101. Additionally, although Manzoni had known key members of Gruppo N, their relationship faltered early on. The artworks are obviously completely incompatible with Manzoni's, and it is unclear (at least to me) to what extent the aesthetic production of Gruppo N carried through its political sympathies.

becomes suffused with melancholy as he acknowledges the inevitability that his own life's work will suffer precisely the same fate—a destiny which his cans of excrement already anticipated with perfect clarity.

At the dawn of the sixties, somewhere around the blurry turn to what we sometimes call postmodernism, there were two artists who saw more clearly than all the others the eventual fate of art's emancipatory promise: Piero Manzoni in Europe and Andy Warhol in America.³⁶⁶ With his silkscreened canvases of consumer commodities, everyday disasters, movie stars and petty criminals, Warhol had fully subsumed the painterly mark into a mechanized apparatus of spectacularized iteration, the completely de-subjectivized production of reified commodity-artworks that stripped a range of avant-garde techniques—monochromy, seriality, readymade—of their mythic capacity to resist the industrialized cultural apparatus against which they had historically defined themselves. Warhol's paintings thus demonstrate the inexorability of their own susceptibility to the absorptive apparatus of spectacle and culture industry to which their imagery points with such mechanistic fidelity.³⁶⁷ Recognizing the absolute centrality of the image in this connection, Warhol continued to operate within the frame of the canvas,

³⁶⁶ Benjamin Buchloh, "Farewell to an Identity," *Artforum International* (December 2012), pp. 252-261. The present Conclusion is indebted to Buchloh's essay, which positions Warhol as the "Cassandra" of the neoliberalization of the art institution. It is the goal of this endnote to suggest that Manzoni played a similar role in Europe. The contemporary descendants of these artists—minus the criticality and political awareness—are obvious: with their spectacular factories, Takashi Murakami and Jeff Koons must be the children of Warhol, just as Damien Hirst, Marina Abramovic, and Vanessa Beecroft, with their body-centric antics, must be Manzoni's brood.

³⁶⁷ Buchloh characterizes Warhol's practice in these terms: "to anticipate that all radical gestures within the framework of an institutionalized and industrialized high art production would inevitably and ultimately generate marketable artistic objects, would end up as mere 'pictures' in a gallery, merely legitimizing the institutional and discursive conventions from which they had emerged." Buchloh, "Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art," *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, p. 512.

but even these paintings, in their icily vacuous reification, take on a strange corporeality which Benjamin Buchloh once compared to Manzoni's *Artist's Shit*.³⁶⁸

For Buchloh in 1989 as for many writers before and after, Manzoni's shit-cans could still suggest a certain naturalism of excretory functionality, the universal condition of bodily experience which Warhol deftly replaces with commodity consumption as the truly universal condition of daily life.³⁶⁹ It has been a major goal of this dissertation, however, to argue that Manzoni's work launches its most damning indictment at precisely this naturalist conception of the body and its functions, which—even in their most base and material facticity—become conscripted to an apparatus of production that makes even the most intimate bodily substances into a series of identical commodities with prices indexed to global markets. The very notion of “nature” for which the body was once the emblem—not to mention the concomitant “human nature” thought to be common to all—find in Manzoni's work only their own annihilating negations, as biomorphism, materiality, embodiment, language, and participation all consent to dissect the body and offer it up for sale. Warhol converts the artistic atelier into The Factory, but for Manzoni it is the body itself which must transform into an apparatus adapted to the requirements of industrial production, alienated labor, and commodity consumerism.

Here we can detect even more commonalities between these two artists, since, beyond the silkscreens, Warhol's films also instrumentalized the body and its processes. Hence *Sleep*, *Blowjob*, *Eat*, *Drunk*, *Dance Movie*, and *Kiss*, which document and catalogue a range of corporeal functionalities that are strikingly similar to the terms of Manzoni's Certificates and Stamps of Authenticity, which could designate a body as a

³⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 508.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 508.

work of art when sleeping, drinking, or dancing.³⁷⁰ Slicing up bodies into stomachs and arms, Manzoni's performative bureaucracy could also attend to the importance of fashion culture in dynamics of subjective identification, since shoes also play the role of body-part in the Certificates on at least two occasions. More than once, he placed empty shoes on the Magic Base, as though these sartorial accessories could stand in for the person herself. We needn't look far for a similar operation in Warhol's practice, since his early drawings of celebrities took the form of their gold-leafed shoes. Excreted body-substances could also become mere materials for Warhol, as in the Cum Paintings and the Oxidation Series—the latter of which, in a manner parallel to shit-for-gold, precipitates the conversion of a metal. Death and the body are also linked in the art of both men. For Warhol, a car-crash or an electric chair could become a thing to hang on one's wall. For Manzoni, a corpse suspended in plastic could become a thing to mock and laugh at. Both artist's also produced irreverent takedowns of the traditional monograph, Manzoni with *Life and Works*, and Warhol with his *Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (1975), *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (1980), and of course the posthumous *Warhol Diaries* (1989).

Warhol's parade of fully-objectified physiognomies made us aware not only of the objectification of the self and its image that is inevitable under present conditions, but also of the complicity of aesthetic practice in that objectifying process. Manzoni achieves virtually the same insight by making himself and everyone else—indeed, the entire world—into an objectified commodity, as in the Living Sculpture-Magic Base cycle, for example. With the same unflinching precision as Warhol's screen divas,

³⁷⁰ The dates for these Warhol films are as follows. 1963: *Sleep, Eat, Dance Movie*, and *Kiss*; 1963-64: *Blowjob*; 1965: *Drunk*.

Manzoni inaugurates his project of global objectification with a film of women's bodies seductively half-dressed under the winking pretense of classicizing aesthetics.

Warhol and Manzoni are also linked in the distinctly biopolitical or neoliberal dimensions of their work. The first chapter of this dissertation argued that Manzoni's works exposes the biopolitical status of the body under conditions of surveillance and spectacle. The biopolitical episteme, as articulated by Foucault, is based on neoliberal conceptions of life—its collective organization, economization, and management—theories whose chief exponents Manzoni wrote about as a student. Recently, Isabel Graw has made a parallel argument for Warhol by demonstrating the biopoliticization of everyday life that occurs in the vapidly glamorous world of spectacular aesthetics.³⁷¹ The branding and entrepreneurialization of the self are also key aspects of neoliberal thought as described by Foucault in *Birth of Biopolitics*.³⁷² Sure enough, Manzoni and Warhol each made himself into a brand: Manzoni with his printed name mechanically-reproduced in the background of can-labels and certificates, Warhol with his factory production and collective execution. Manzoni even literalizes the self-as-enterprise, making his own body into a productive machine for the manufacture of human commodities.

If, as Buchloh has suggested, the two principal tasks of an avant-garde could be defined as “utopian anticipation” and “critical negation,” Manzoni and Warhol both

³⁷¹ Isabelle Graw, “When Life Goes to Work: Andy Warhol,” *October* 132 (Spring 2010), pp. 99–113.

³⁷² In *Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault explains the self-as-enterprise that originates in German ordoliberal theory, “And finally, the individual's life itself—with his relationships to his private property, for example, with his family, household, insurance, and retirement—must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise,” p. 241. American neoliberalism operates similarly: “*Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself,” p. 226.

found themselves at the same impasse we recognize today.³⁷³ To prefigure a better reality is already to succumb not only to the seductions of magical thinking and conciliatory amnesia, but also to the requirements of a culture industry that thrives precisely on false assurances (endlessly repeated) that utopia, if not already accessible by optimistic re-imaginings of present conditions, is just around the corner. Critical negation, in Manzoni's work as in Warhol's, finds itself dialectically entwined in the apparatus of its own undoing, the implacably affirmative rictus of spectacularization. At that historical moment, a series of previously-valid epistemes of oppositional avant-gardism appeared to both artists to have lost their claim to truth-value: neither the rigors of rationalist-enlightenment modernism nor the sensuousness of visceral-primitivist romanticism, neither the most retrograde archaisms of tradition nor the most cutting-edge technophilic scientism could any longer be said to operate outside of or in opposition to dominant forms of administered consciousness and industrially-produced subjectivities. As Manzoni and Warhol both saw, the apparatus of culture industry would eventually domesticate all of these once-wild breeds and train them to fiercely guard their masters.

For commentators on both of these artists, what has often been difficult to articulate are the specific contours of their critique, since they each stand squarely at the dialectical intersection between aesthetic negation and affirmative spectacularization. If either can be said to waver at all from this suspended position—and this may ultimately mark the distinction between them—we could say that Warhol tilts in the direction of spectacle, while Manzoni leans into negation. Their interventions in the cultural arrangements of the early sixties may only have been valid for a brief moment in time, a moment when the naivetés of the fifties faced off against the spectacle and social

³⁷³ Buchloh, "Farewell to an Identity," p. 257.

upheavals of the sixties. It can be difficult today, for instance, to reconstruct the critical force of Pop painting, since it was almost immediately eclipsed by its own embrace within official culture. Although early Warhol played the signs of affirmation and negation against one another in a perfectly depthless balance, it is hard to ignore his long post-history as the reigning prince of affirmation in all its glory. Manzoni's career was cut profoundly short, and his somewhat uncertain position within the critical literature probably has much to do with the fact that the neoliberal conditions he anticipated have only become manifest in the last thirty years or so.

Manzoni's practice consisted of negating, in a more or less systematic fashion, both utopian *and* critical claims in virtually every aspect of his work. The monochrome, the readymade, the unconscious, participatory spectatorship, embodied spectatorship, embodied authorship, embodiment in general, gender difference, performance, performativity, new materials, traditional materials, biomorphism, geometricity, indexicality, critiques of authorship, radical reduction, aesthetic withdrawal, and mass-distribution all find themselves turned against every possible claim of emancipation.

To put it schematically, Manzoni's radical negativity is a mode of criticism that comes in the form of a clear and plangent *warning*. Beware the work of art. Beware vanguard aesthetics. Forget utopia, for here is an artwork that does its worst. We are a far cry from heroic resistance with Manzoni. His totally demystified works instruct us, by way of theoretically precise examples, about the perils of culture industry allied with an art institution still dreaming of its own long-lost utopias. In the wrong hands or under the right conditions, works of art can indeed "fall into the trap" Manzoni identified, a trap not

only of commercialization but also of false consciousness, especially when works retain the sheen of criticality in its manifest absence.

As acts of discourse, works of art are not just subject to but also implicated in the networks of power relations that make discourse possible. Even if the achievements of the best artworks have been to alter the discursive arrangements into which they are inserted, it is folly to believe that all works of art are somehow exempt from becoming not just objects of but even *agents* of this power. Art has always served some social function or another, and there is nothing in its history to suggest that this function is reflexively emancipatory. United with an ever-increasing apparatus of visualization and blinded by a long-outdated esteem for its own liberatory potential, the operations of the visual arts are just as capable of propagating the conditions of unfreedom as they are of opposing them.

Manzoni warned us of these things long ago. Let's hope we start to listen.

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